

THE SUBTLE BODY IN THE ESOTERIC BUDDHIST ART OF THE HIMALAYAS:

PRACTICE AND REPRESENTATION

By

LINDSAY LEWIS ETHRIDGE

(Under the Direction of Nicolas Morrissey)

ABSTRACT

The visual culture related to yoga and the subtle body is gaining popularity at a remarkable rate. Surprisingly, however, within this new field of inquiry, Buddhist material has been largely ignored. Unfortunately, the few attempts that have been made to study Buddhist representations of the subtle body are problematic at best, employing the limited and ultimately inappropriate strategy of viewing images as illustrations of specific canonical texts. This study, in contrast, aims to shed such methods and first consider the visual evidence in isolation. It takes into consideration three nearly identical nineteenth-century Himalayan *thangkas*, one nineteenth-century Nepalese painting, and one double-sided eleventh-century Tibetan painting, exploring the ways in which these five images reflect the philosophy and practice of Vajrayāna Buddhism. It is hoped that an examination of these didactic tools helps to illuminate one of the ways in which esoteric knowledge was transmitted within traditions that celebrate transformative yogic practice.

INDEX WORDS: yoga, subtle body, Buddhist Yoga, Buddhist Art, Himalayan Art, Tantric Art, Tibetan Art, Newar Art, Vajrayana, yogi, yogin, yogini, *cakra*, *nadi*, *‘phrul ‘khor*, *rtsa rlung*, mirror divination, *prasena*, *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, *Kalacakra Tantra*, Vajrayogini

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LINDSAY LEWIS ETHRIDGE

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LINDSAY LEWIS ETHRIDGE

Major Professor: Nicolas Morrissey

Committee: Asen Kirin
Janice Simon

Electronic Version Approved:

Julie Coffield
Interim Director of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE ART OF THE SUBTLE BODY

The Sanskrit term *yoga* has been in use for at least three and a half millennia. Derived from the verbal root \sqrt{yuj} , meaning to “join,” “unite,” or “yoke,” it first appears in the *R̥g Veda*, composed between 1700 and 1500 BCE. In this ancient literary embodiment of Indian thought, *yoga* denotes “a war chariot, comprising the wheeled vehicle, the team of horses pulling it, and the yoke that held the two together.”¹ Over time, the literal image of a yoked chariot developed into a metaphor for a warrior’s heroic ascent into the sun at the time of death, a process which was mediated by a ritual specialist, the Vedic priest.² Priests were the ultimate power brokers in this transaction. Acting on a kind of transcendental authority empowered by their unique command of *mantras* (“magical” verbal formulae) and ritual technology, they performed fire sacrifices in order to bridge the gap between human and divine realms and maintain balance in the universe. By the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE, when the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Upaniṣads* were being composed, the fire sacrifice became internalized, and individuals sought to generate a powerful and transformative “yogic” heat (*tapas*) within their own bodies. This heat was thought to facilitate an embodied

¹ David Gordon White, “Yoga in Transformation,” in *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, ed. Debra Diamond, ex. cat. (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2013), 35-36.

² See White, “Ceci n’est pas un Yogi,” in *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 38-82.

experience of super-mundane awareness or release from conventional reality, an experience that was distinct from – and superior to – death.

So, what, if anything, does the articulation of “yoga” in historical texts have to do with the increasingly popular modern practice of choreographed exercise performed collectively on a rectangular rubber mat in a sweaty room and stretch pants? The comparison to warriors mounting the afterlife and self-aggrandizing religio-mystics might not seem immediately apparent. Yet contemporary yoga teachers and scholars alike invariably proclaim that a distinct continuity does exist between the vision of Vedic sages and the modern people who, in growing number, see some value in practicing breath control and various physical postures that (ideally) embody a particular “yogic” worldview. However, this begs the question: to what degree is contemporary understanding, or misunderstanding, being projected into the past? Despite the current appearance of consistency in the use of the term “yoga” to denote transformative spiritual practices that were in some way grounded in the human body, David Gordon White has aptly emphasized that its exact meaning was in flux for a millennium – certainly between the mid-centuries BCE and the early-centuries CE, to say nothing of the myriad permutations and evolutions of individual sects and lineages that have come gone since that time.³ White has comprehensively traced elements of the evolution of yoga, its inventors and practitioners, particularly with his exhaustive work, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*.⁴ Although pioneering, White, like most scholars of Indian Religion, remains primarily engaged in literary analysis. Although his work is progressive in the extent to which it does incorporate –

³ White, *Sinister Yogis*, 38-48.

⁴ White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

however marginally – visual culture, the scholarly understanding of the artistic traditions inspired by yoga has, to say the least, yet to be fully engaged.

As a consequence of this nascent state of scholarly investigation, the problems inherent in accessing historically localized conceptions of yoga and their relationship to, or influence on, visual culture in ancient India are manifold. Perhaps the most acute and fundamental flaw remains ahistorical projection, which is vividly evident, for example, in the manner in which the so called ‘Proto-Śiva’ seal from the Indus Valley has been discussed – an image significant as perhaps the earliest representation of a yogic figure in Indian art [Fig. 1.1]. The attribution of the figure in this seal as an iconographic ancestor of the Hindu deity Śiva is problematic for variety of reasons.⁵ Most critically, it assumes cultural continuity between the Indus Valley, which reached its apogee in the late third-millennium BCE, and early Hinduism, which only began to develop some 2000 years later.⁶ Unfortunately, however, this continuity is otherwise unsupported by archaeological and linguistic evidence.⁷ Even more unfortunately, such problematic methodological assumptions remain firmly embedded within broader scholarship on the art of yoga and the subtle body in Indian visual culture, examples of which are almost invariably prefaced with a discussion of the ‘Proto-Śiva’ seal.

⁵ For a candid discussion of this attribution, see the useful summary in Wendy Doniger’s chapter, “Civilization in the Indus Valley: 50,000 to 1500 BCE,” *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 65-84.

⁶ The exact nature of the decline of the Indus Valley and its relationship, or lack thereof, to the origin of the Indo-Aryan composers of the Vedic texts to which Hinduism traces its origins is a highly contentious issue in Indic Studies, one far beyond the scope of this paper. For a summary of the debate, see Laurie L. Patton’s introduction to *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, eds. Edwin F. Bryant and Laurie L. Patton (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-18; as well as a review of this volume by Stephanie W. Jamison in *Journal of Indo-European Studies* (2006): 255-261.

⁷ Moreover, White has convincingly argued that the iconography of the so-called “yogic posture” that resembles more modern seated poses like *baddhakoṇāsana*, “bound angle pose,” appears actually to have been used to connote royalty before it was used to connote asceticism or yogic practice. See White, *Sinister Yogis*, 48-59.

Historically, yogic practice has necessarily involved some degree of theorization about an extra-biological aspect of the human interior. The earliest suggestion of speculation about a subtle internal anatomy in Indian literature is found in the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, estimated to date to the fourth- or fifth-century BCE, and elements of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* (c. fourth-century CE) foreshadow the *cakras* that became central to the yogic treatises of medieval *siddhas* and *tantrikas*.⁸ Contemporary scholars often describe this internal anatomy as the “subtle body,” which is a translation of the Vedāntic term *sūkṣmaśarīra*, referring to a sort of quasi-material interface between mind and body. Notions about the subtle body were popularized in the West in the late nineteenth-century by authors associated with the Theosophical Society and continue to inform contemporary understandings of yoga. The legacy of this affiliation has led Western scholars to dismiss and sometimes even revile theories of the subtle body, a state which has only perpetuated confusion about it.⁹ Clearly, however, techniques for manipulating the subtle body have evolved over centuries and reflect increasingly refined conceptualizations that are unique to individual religious traditions, between and within different sectarian groups. Commonly, the subtle body is conceived as an ethereal physiology that exists alongside the gross body. It consists of a central channel (*avadhūtī*, *mahānāḍī*, *suśūmnā*) that runs along the spinal column (usually in front of it) and two subsidiary channels (the *īḍā* or *lalanā* on the left, the *piṅgalā* or *rasanā* on the right) that run on either side of the central channel. These channels, or *nāḍī*, carry

⁸Far more sophisticated conceptualizations of subtle anatomy have been found in Chinese Daoist manuscripts dating to the second-century BCE, which suggests that the theories developed by medieval Indian practitioners stemmed from ideas that may have originated in China. See Geoffrey Samuel, “The Subtle Body in India and Beyond,” in *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West: Between Mind and Body*, eds. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 33-47.

⁹ See Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston, “General Introduction,” in *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West: Between Mind and Body*, eds. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-9.

prāṇa, wind or vital breath, throughout the body. They intersect at particularly powerful points along the central channel called *cakras*, meaning “wheels” or “energy centers.”

The focus of this study is oriented towards examining the seemingly marginal position of representations of yogic practice and the subtle body within historical *Buddhist* expressions of South Asian visual culture. Scholarship pertaining to yoga and the subtle body, particularly in the case of Buddhist art, is a relatively new field of inquiry for both the disciplines of Religious Studies and Art History. Interest, however, is burgeoning, as exemplified by the recent exhibition at the Smithsonian’s Freer and Sackler Galleries. *Yoga: The Art of Transformation* opened in Washington DC in October of 2013. Though this exhibition holds the rightful claim of being the first of its kind, while its collection of objects creatively represents many images from Hindu and Mughal traditions, its inclusion of Buddhist material is, significantly, and perhaps surprisingly, comparatively sparse.¹⁰ The exhibition includes within its display an underwhelming three, perhaps four, expressly Buddhist objects. This paucity of attention is particularly curious because it can be argued that the philosophical speculation centering on the subtle body – as well as the practices oriented towards manipulating it – constitute an integral, if not central, component of certain forms of Buddhism, particularly the esoteric Tantric traditions still present in the Himalayan region. The aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate and shed light on the visual culture and ritual practices that

¹⁰ To underscore the extent of this bias, see two of the catalogue entries by curator Debra Diamond, “The Cosmic Body” and “The Subtle Body” (in *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, cited above, 160-164 and 166-167), both of which discuss conceptions of yoga using only Hindu terms, as well as presume that the specific contexts of *haṭha yoga* apply to all yogic systems, thus precluding any non-Hindu perspectives. See also Mark Singleton’s essay, “Globalized Modern Yoga,” in *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, 95-103, for a summary of how the transmission of yoga to the West was dominated by modern revisionist Hindu practitioners and sympathizers such that the contemporary popular understanding of yoga in the West derives almost exclusively from Hindu theories.

inform “Buddhist yoga,” whose representations of the subtle body have heretofore remained largely veiled.

Only a single substantial recent publication has addressed Buddhist art of the subtle body, but, as we will see, it is problematic for several reasons. *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* is an incredibly rich, not to mention dense, catalogue that accompanied an exhibition of the same name featuring material associated with the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, a late eighth- or early ninth-century esoteric Buddhist text.¹¹ Co-curated by John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, the exhibition included two nineteenth-century Himalayan paintings on cloth that represent the subtle body in a diagrammatic way, mapping onto the basic human anatomy the various components of the complex physiognomy of the subtle body as it was possibly articulated in the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* [Cat. nos. 1 and 4]. However, before we begin to discuss these images, it might be worthwhile to spend some time with the text of the catalogue. Like the Smithsonian’s exhibition, it presents itself as pioneering a “thematic” approach to Asian art, which is not necessarily inappropriate. But, some aspects of its introduction are difficult to ignore and, I think, problematic. In addition, I believe much of its content is, perhaps unintentionally, misleading – a fact which a discussion of these two images will surely bear out. The opening paragraph of Huntington’s introduction reads:

When is an art exhibition not an art exhibition? When it is about the beauty of the idea beyond the art. *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* exhibition has been designed to highlight the aspirations and ideals that inspired this remarkable body of works of art. For forty years I have

¹¹ John C. Huntington and Dina Bangdel, eds., *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, ex. cat. (Columbus: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003). The exhibition was on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from October 5, 2003 to January 4, 2004, and again at the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio from February 6 to May 9 of the same year.

had the privilege of studying the history and art of Buddhism – a religious tradition that envisions as its highest goal a virtually super-human state, accessible to living human beings, in which the perfected one’s sole reason for existence is the altruistic assistance of others without the slightest concern for his or her own well-being. The exceptional artworks gathered here reflect the religious practices that lead to this compassionate, illumined state of being, as well as the myriad aesthetic expressions of its attainment.¹²

By claiming that *The Circle of Bliss* is not an “art exhibition” for privileging ideas suggests, contentiously, that ideas have held little place in Asian art exhibitions. However, Huntington is well aware of the tendency of Asian Art History to be dominated by issues of style and provenance, and he self-consciously attempts to distance his work from those methods, rejecting “Western-based taxonomies” and highlighting the exhibition’s being “pan-Asian in scope and as non-regional in approach as possible.”¹³ Although much more could be said about the motivations, successes, and failures of Huntington’s attempt to distance *The Circle of Bliss* from outdated methodologies, let us now turn to the remainder of his opening remarks, which, conveniently, outline some of my own priorities in introducing Buddhist representations of the subtle body. After defining the goals of his exhibition, Huntington attempts to define Buddhism – a phenomenon that has existed in a variety of forms for more than two and a half millennia – in a single remarkably reductionist sentence. According to the traditional narrative, one night after years

¹² Huntington, “Introduction,” *The Circle of Bliss*, 19.

¹³ Huntington, “Introduction,” *The Circle of Bliss*, 19, 21. Emphasis on aesthetic value at the expense of ideological or religious value has long been a crutch for Asian Art Historians. For a useful analysis of their methodological pitfalls with regard to Buddhist Art, see Bernard Faure, “The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 768-812.

of unfruitful practice, the renouncer Siddhārtha Gautama discerned the complete knowledge of the nature of reality and became awakened as the Buddha. After forty-five years of teaching, the Buddha left the world and his teachings were preserved for several hundred years by his monastic following, the *saṅgha*. Then, in the early centuries of the Common Era, Buddhist philosophers began to reflect on the nature of the Buddha's awakening, and the very nature of Buddhahood. These Buddhists agreed that anyone, even a layman, could achieve awakening, provided that person made a vow to become a buddha. This vow transforms one into a *bodhisattva*, an ideal being who labors over innumerable lifetimes to cultivate wisdom and compassion in order to become a buddha. Ultimately, however, "buddhahood" is postponed until the *bodhisattva* has liberated all sentient beings from suffering by helping *them* to achieve awakening. This school of Buddhism came to be known as Mahāyāna, as distinguished from the eighteen earlier sects of mainstream Buddhism, including the Theravāda.

In the mid- to late-centuries of the first millennium of the Common Era, Buddhism experienced another transformation in the wake of a socio-religious movement that spread across India, a movement broadly defined as Tantra. Tantric practitioners are often characterized as transgressive, renunciant, antinomian, "crazy yogis," yet, perhaps surprisingly, elements of their philosophical orientation and practice have surfaced in all Indic religious traditions and have since been exported across Asia.¹⁴ Early Buddhist tantric practitioners were known as *siddhas*,

¹⁴ See White, "Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition," in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3-38.

and they inspired what is now called the Vajrayāna school of Buddhism.¹⁵ This highly esoteric form of Buddhism is characterized by its goal of radically reorienting the mind through complex rituals and arduous physical practices that necessarily involve yoga and the manipulation of the subtle body. This “steep path” is thought to result in one’s being able to achieve awakening in a single lifetime, and it engendered a new ideal practitioner: the yogi.

The *Cakrasaṃvara* literary tradition exemplifies one aspect of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Those who created and make use of its texts and associated material culture are invested in the idea that an “ordinary” human being can become a Buddha, and that he or she can achieve this great awakening in the present, as opposed to after countless lifetimes on the *bodhisattva* path. Historically, in this context, the yogis and ascetics who have sought to attain Buddhahood have been recognized and, especially in Tibet, valorized as the most accomplished and dedicated (as well as dangerous) Buddhist practitioners. Huntington’s introduction to *The Circle of Bliss* appropriately echoes this valorization of transformative attainment. Yet, significantly, despite the fact that he expresses interest that his exhibition reflect religious practices employed in the service of that goal, his introduction fails to address an interest in those who perform such practices. Unfortunately, overall, his work is characterized by a rather detached preoccupation with conveying his highly cerebral understanding of “Buddha-ness,”

¹⁵ Also known as Tantric Buddhism, Mantrayāna, the Diamond or Adamantine Vehicle, Vajrayāna developed largely in Northern India from about the seventh- until the twelfth-century, when Indic Buddhism declined, in part, due to Muslim invaders. Prior to its extinction from India, however, Vajrayāna Buddhism was exported to the Himalayan regions, and is still alive in Tibet and Nepal. For an overview of *siddhas* and their practice, see Geoffrey Samuel, “The Siddha as a Cultural Category,” in *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*, ed. Rob Linrothe, ex. cat. (New York: Rubin Museum of Art and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2006), 37-47.

the nature of which has for centuries confounded Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Moreover, Huntington's approach to organizing the exhibition, as well as his tendency to undermine or undervalue the people who may have actually used Buddhist texts and images, is particularly challenging with respect to esoteric traditions like that of the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, a text which resists interpretation at every turn. Consider, for example, the opening verse, "And now I will explain the secret (*rahasyaṃ*), concisely, not extensively. Union with Śrī Heruka (*śrīherukasamyoga*) is the means of achieving all desired aims."¹⁶ The term *rahasyaṃ* refers to both the ultimate goal of practice (gnosological or meditative "union" with the tradition's central deity, Heruka), and to the practices themselves. The language of the text is not only confusing and obscure, but its message is deliberately veiled. It presents the case that one must be thoroughly familiar with ritual practice in order to understand the goal of practice, and that one must have already achieved ultimate understanding in order to correctly implement the ritual practice. To compound this impenetrability, the interpretation of the text, the practices "described" within it, and the results they aim to yield, the details of none of which are disclosed fully, has evolved and transformed over centuries as a consequence of the interpretations of numerous commentators and practitioner specialists. In short, the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* is, like all esoteric texts, remarkably obtuse even for the adept, not to mention the scholar. The former *requires* the oral exegesis of an experienced *guru*, an empowered teacher, in order to make sense of text and practice; and, in fact, an adept may or may not ever have an opportunity or need to

¹⁶ David Gray, "Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*," *Numen* 52 (2005): 433.

engage a particular text. It is the *guru* who is ultimately responsible for mediating the tradition and the practitioner; the meanings of texts alone remain elusive and incomplete.¹⁷

The elliptical paradox embedded in the language of the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* is to be recognized as an essential characteristic of Tantric Buddhism, and this is, therefore, an appropriate – and necessary – foregrounding to a discussion of images that are intended to somehow illustrate and compliment the complex philosophies and practices it alludes to. The two images of the subtle body [Cat. nos. 1 and 4] included in *The Circle of Bliss* exhibition that Huntington and Bangdel claim to be affiliated with the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* are from Tibet and Nepal, respectively, and date to the nineteenth-century. Both represent standing male figures whose bodies are superimposed with six diagrammatic *cakras*. The *cakras* of the yogin in Cat. no. 1 are represented as deities within lotuses, and the figure of the yogin is surrounded by several strata of various other beings, such as *siddhas*, monks, and deities. The *cakras* of the yogin in Cat. no. 5 are represented with *yantras*, sacred geometrical forms. The figure is isolated, but several additional *yantras* and symbols are depicted vertically in a column above his head. Bangdel and Huntington point out that images like these are particularly rare, and that they were perhaps commissioned by *gurus* and intended for novices who were becoming acquainted with the subtle body. In both catalogue entries, the descriptions lead the viewer through the *cakras*, identifying them and briefly explaining their symbolism. Both images are labeled as “Diagrams of Newar Yogic Six-Chakra

¹⁷ On the paramount importance of *gurus*, see André Padoux, “The Tantric Guru,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 41-51.

Transformation,” and it is claimed that their representation of *cakras* derives from the “Kundalini System.”¹⁸

There is much to ponder about the nature of Bangdel and Huntington’s characterization of these two paintings. The authors chose these images because they believe them to represent identical systems, and this might well be the case. However, the relationship of these two paintings to the *Cakrasaṃvara* textual tradition seems remarkably unstable, and at the very least in need of critical reexamination. First, the “kundalini system” is not Buddhist and usually includes seven *cakras*.¹⁹ The names given for the (six) *cakras* depicted in these two images are not Buddhist – with the one exception of the navel *cakra* for which the Buddhist epithet, *nirmāṇa*, is invoked as an afterthought. It is particularly significant for Buddhist terminology to be included for the navel *cakra*, as the Buddhist variant of the Hindu goddess Kuṇḍalinī (Buddhist: Caṇḍālī) dwells in the navel *cakra*, as opposed to the *mūlādhāra* or root *cakra* at the base of the spine, where Kuṇḍalini resides. Second, although yogic systems are highly diverse, many Buddhist systems enumerate four basic *cakras* at the navel, heart, neck, and crown of the head, respectively. A fifth is sometimes added at the forehead, and a sixth at the genitals or the base of the spine.²⁰ Both of these paintings, in contrast,

¹⁸ Bangdel and Huntington, *The Circle of Bliss*, 232. The Tibetan painting is described as Newar presumably because Bangdel and Huntington argue it was commissioned by Newars; see below.

¹⁹ In fact, “kundalini system” is rather a misnomer. The activation of latent energy within the body, sometimes personified as a coiled snake, the goddess Kuṇḍalinī, is a ubiquitous feature of *haṭha* yogic systems developed and refined primarily by Śaivite groups from the early centuries of the second millennium of the Common Era. See White, *Alchemical Body*, and Diamond, “The Subtle Body” (cited above).

²⁰ Two major but conflicting Buddhist systems are articulated in the eighth-century *Hevajra Tantra* and the eleventh-century *Kālacakra Tantra*, respectively. For a brief outline of both, see Samuel, “The Subtle Body in India and Beyond,” 39-42. See also Alex Wayman, “Female Energy and Symbolism in the Buddhist Tantras,” in *Buddhist Tantras: Light on Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995), 164-201. Wayman’s thoughts are largely drawn from the fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Tibetan commentaries by Tson-kha-pa and his pupil Mkhas-grub rje on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (eighth-century) and the *Kālacakra Tantra*. Garma C. C. Chang, a twentieth-century Tibetan practitioner,

include two *cakras* below the navel: the *mūlādhāra* or root *cakra*, and the *svadhiṣṭhāna* or genital *cakra*. Notably, the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* itself makes no mention of *cakras*, an omission which probably has to do with an understanding of its conception of the subtle body being taken for granted by those who consulted the text and the reliance on the oral exegesis of *gurus*. Moreover, the *Ḍākārṇava*, an explanatory tantra in the *Cakrasaṃvara* tradition, elaborates a system of four *cakras* and not six, as is pictured.²¹

Clearly, there is a disconnect between what historians of art have had to say about these images of the subtle body and what historians of Buddhism have had to say about the literary traditions they may reflect. However, it could be argued that much of the commentary in *The Circle of Bliss* would be far less problematic if the authors were not trying to link these paintings directly to the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*. In light of these two examples, perhaps we should not assume that representations of the subtle body necessarily illustrate any one particular literary tradition. Perhaps we should not assume that representations of the subtle body illustrate literary tradition at all.

One sustained attempt to unpack a Buddhist representation of the subtle body has been offered by Amy Heller. Her work stands as the only attempted interpretation of two highly enigmatic diagrams painted on either side of a single sheet of paper produced in Western Tibet in the eleventh-century [Cat. no. 5].²² The image on the recto depicts a standing yogin whose body is superimposed with six diagrammatic *cakras*. The figure's left hand holds a seventh *cakra*. Each *cakra* is labeled with an

emphasizes that there are four primary *cakras* in Tibetan systems. See Chang, *Teachings of Tibetan Yoga* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1963), 56-57, 124 n. 23.

²¹ See Gray, *The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra (The Discourse of Śrī Heruka, Śrīherukābhidhāna): A Study and Annotated Translation* (New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, 2007), 74, n.196.

²² Amy Heller, "Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations," *Tibet Journal* v. 34/35 no. 3-4/1-2, (2009): 59-70. For a color reproduction, see: Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Kashmir* ex. cat. (New York and Milano: Asia Society and 5 Continents Editions, 2007), fig. 116.

inscription. The verso depicts eleven *cakras* or symbols aligned in a single column. On the left side of the page there are two “historical” inscriptions that seem to refer to the individual who made or commissioned the image, as well as to its intended use. Unfortunately, however, both the inscriptions and the imagery are frustratingly oblique, and comparative material of this antiquity, if extant, is certainly scarce. Heller suggests that the *cakras* in the figure on the recto reflect a microcosmic view of the diagram on the verso, which would then be a macrocosmic symbolic representation of the universe. In principle this seems plausible, but as in the catalogue entries discussed above, Heller neglects to carefully consider the images themselves, and does not address the full extent of the various visual elements of either painting, particularly with respect to the figure of the yogin.²³ After providing a minimal description of the paintings, she laments that “it has not yet been possible to correlate this series of the syllables and all [sic] shapes with a specific text, whether Vajrayogini or Kalachakra.”²⁴ Yet, in spite of her acknowledgment that the images do not seem to correspond to a specific literary source she tries to link them to a Vajrayoginī *sādhana* text, noting, however, that the paintings are an imperfect parallel to the visualizations it describes. She then moves on to the inscriptions and devotes nearly twice as much attention to parsing out the identity of their author than she does to either of the paintings. Again, the strategy of using a text to frame the image has proven to be an impediment to understanding, and it is clear that a different approach might be both necessary and fruitful.

²³ For example, Heller virtually ignores the curiously bizarre imagery of the third *cakra*, except to say that it betrays Hindu influence, as well as the *nāḍī* which are clearly depicted within it and run from there all the way up the spine of the figure.

²⁴ Heller, “Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations,” 62.

The tendency to read images as illustrations of specific texts both fails to fully engage the historical community of practitioners who produce images and outright neglects to consider images on their own. This study aims to remove the lens of the text and first consider the visual evidence in isolation. A catalogue of five Buddhist representations of the subtle body will be examined. These images will be documented and analyzed in order to perhaps access how they were intended to be viewed and used by those who made them. To that end, three nearly identical nineteenth-century Himalayan *thangkas* [Cat. nos. 1-3], as well as a nineteenth-century Nepalese painting [Cat. no. 4] will be considered with an eye toward examining the context of their production within the world of Vajrayāna Buddhism. In addition, the eleventh-century Tibetan painting discussed by Heller [Cat no. 5] will be revisited in an attempt to delve more deeply into its relationship with particular yogic and divination practices mentioned in its inscriptions. It is hoped that by considering these images without the con-textual baggage that has proven to be burdensome and inappropriate, we might more easily identify, evaluate and perhaps understand commonalities and divergences between these particular representations of the subtle body. Finally, it is hoped that an examination of the relationships between these images will contribute to an understanding of their broader relationship to Vajrayāna Buddhist art and practice.

CHAPTER 2

THE CATALOGUE: REPRESENTING BUDDHIST ART OF THE SUBTLE BODY

Seeing and Doing: The Path of the Yogi

Buddhist representations of the subtle body have yet to be studied efficaciously, marked by an absence of comparative analysis. In order to initiate such a conversation, let us return to an image already introduced: the Tibetan *thangka* featured in *The Circle of Bliss* [Cat. no. 1]. This nineteenth-century painting is composed of mineral pigments and gold on cotton cloth with silk borders.²⁵ It depicts a centrally-placed, standing male yogin with five *cakras* superimposed on his body in a vertical line, suggestive of a spinal column. The yogin stands on a lotus blossom and is surrounded by numerous divine and semi-divine figures. Above the yogin's head is a single *cakra*, represented as a rainbow of light that encircles a pair of deities embracing in sexual union.

The row of figures below the standing yogin consists of representations of fierce guardian deities, a defining feature of Tantric traditions. These are the four *Lokapālas* or Heavenly Kings, Virūpākṣa, Vaiśravaṇa, Virūḍhaka, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. In the row above them, divided by the yogin's lotus pedestal, there are four *mahāsiddhas*, identifiable as such by their matted locks, skull ornaments, animal skins, and yogic straps and postures. The figure on the far right is likely Kapālapa, "The Skull-Cup-Bearer," as he is

²⁵ According to Bangdel and Huntington, though this image is representative of the Menri Sarma school of central Tibet, it was perhaps commissioned by Newars living in the region, as a few elements suggest familiarity with Newar conventions, such as the manner of the representation of divine couples within the *cakras* and the inclusion of the goddess Hāritī. See *The Circle of Bliss*, 232.

holding a skull-cup, or *kapāla*. The figure to his left has been identified as Campaka.²⁶ The *mahāsiddha* on the far left who is seated with knees bound by a yogic strap and arms crossed in front of his torso most resembles contemporary representations of Cauraṅgipa [Fig. 2.1] or his teacher, Aciṅta [Fig. 2.2].²⁷ The dark figure to his left may be Rāhula, as there is a very similar, inscribed portrait of him painted on the Southern wall of the fifteenth-century Lamdre Chapel in the Palkhor Tsuglagkhang at Gyantse in the Tsang province of Southern Tibet [Fig. 2.3].²⁸

Immediately above the *mahāsiddhas*, but similarly bisected by the yogin's lower body, there is a bilaterally symmetrical architectural element, probably a monastic complex. Within the structure, on either side, there is an enshrined image of a buddha. On the left, he displays *bhumisparśa mudrā*, and on the right, *dhyāna mudrā*. Also on either side, there is an image of a dark figure in the clouds. This figure is unidentifiable at present, but perhaps could be the eleventh-century Indian *guru* Dampa Sangye, whose image has been identified in a similar location in another painting in this catalogue [Cat. no. 3 – see below]. Diagonally above the monastery on either side of the yogin's shins, there is a vignette of a Tantric practitioner and another image of a buddha in the clouds. The practitioner may be engaged in the practice of deity yoga (*devayoga*), in which case the image of the buddha would represent the practitioner's meditative visualization. Above these identical scenes, on either side of the yogin's

²⁶ Bangdel and Huntington have identified these four from right to left as Kapālapa, Campaka, Rāhula, and Kuchipa, although they offer no justification for these attributions.

²⁷ See Keith Dowman, trans., *Buddhist Masters of Enchantment: The Lives and Legends of the Mahasiddhas* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1998), 63-66 and 119-121.

²⁸ See Ulrich von Schroeder, *Empowered Masters: Tibetan Wall Paintings of Mahāsiddhas at Gyantse* (Chicago: Serindia Publications and Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2006), plate no. 38. In this wall painting, Rāhula is dark in color and similarly relaxed in a posture of "royal ease" with his left knee bound by a yogic strap. It should be noted, however, that the representation of many siddhas is variable and inconsistent, and conclusive identifications are elusive in the absence of inscriptions or characteristic iconographic attributes.

knees, there is a second pair of mirrored vignettes. Each scene includes a dancing figure in orange robes, a *dākiṇī* carrying a skull-bowl and a flaying knife and riding a snow lion, an image of *Mahāsiddha* Luipa consuming fish entrails, and three unidentifiable subsidiary tantric practitioners. Above them, to the left of the yogin's torso, there is an image of the beloved Tibetan yogi Milarepa. Milarepa is depicted seated in a cave with various tantric ritual tools. Among these is a curious vessel which may signify the Vase Consecration (*kalaśābhiṣeka*), the first consecration experienced by a new initiate [Fig. 2.9].²⁹ The figure across from Milarepa, to the right of the yogin's torso, bears a strong resemblance to what Detlef-Ingo Lauf has identified as the Chinese *arhat* Hva-Shang [Cat. no. 3].³⁰ Characteristically, Hva-Shang's iconography includes a corpulent figure, a *māla*, and a lemon or persimmon as attributes, as well as a group of children. This figure appears to be holding, not a lemon, but a tiny figure, perhaps a child. Both Milarepa and Hva-Shang appear to have an entourage consisting of an identical pair of attendants and, above them, an image of a buddha with a lama and a *siddha* on either side of him.

Directly above Milarepa and Hva-Shang are two goddesses and their retinues. To the left of the yogin's head is a representation of a six-armed, yellow Vasundharā. She carries a text in her upper left hand, flowers in her middle left hand, and a gem in her

²⁹ Here understood to mean consecration or empowerment, the root meaning of *abhiṣeka* is to sprinkle, or to water. Practitioners as described in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* undergo a series of consecrations throughout their careers, and each one demands the use of sacred water. See Glenn Wallis, "The Empowered Practitioner (*sādhaka*)," in *Mediating the Power of Buddhas: Ritual in the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 127-158. See also Alexis Sanderson, "Vajrayāna: Origin and Function," in *Buddhism into the Year 2000: International Conference Proceedings* (Bangkok and Los Angeles: Dhammakaya Foundation, 1994), 90.

³⁰ See Detlef-Ingo Lauf, *Verborgene Botschaft tibetischer Thangkas: Bildmeditation und Deutung lamaistischer Kultbilder*, ex. cat. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Auum Verlag, 1976), 90. For another highly similar nineteenth-century portrait of Hva-Shang, see the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center's *Sacred Art of Tibet: Issued on the Occasion of the Sacred Art of Tibet Exhibition and Film Festival at Lone Mountain College, San Francisco, December 1972*, ex. cat. (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1972), cat. no. 26. For an excellent fifteenth century Tibetan representation and commentary, see Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A. F. Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet, Expanded Edition*, ex. cat. (New York: Tibet House New York and Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 110-111, cat. no. 14 [Fig. 2.4 in the present paper].

lower left hand resting in her lap. She has a *māla* and peacock feathers in her upper right hands, and her lower right hand is extended in *varada mudrā*, the gesture of bestowing boons. Above her is an image of a monk, and on either side of her, there are three unidentifiable *siddha*-type figures. To the right of the yogin's head is a white Hāritī, identifiable from the child she holds in her lap with her lower left hand. Her other attributes are identical to Vasundarā's except that, rather than peacock feathers, her middle right hand holds a mirror. Hāritī exemplifies the type of wrathful, destructive demoness that, after having been converted to Buddhism, was transformed into one of innumerable protector deities in the Vajrayāna pantheon. As a protector of children, it is appropriate that she is depicted together with Hva-Shang. According to Bangdel and Huntington, in Nepal, Hāritī is considered an exoteric emanation of Vajrayoginī, an aspect which links this image both to esoteric practice (the cult of Vajrayoginī) and to Newar patronage.³¹ Above the goddesses, in each corner of the painting, there is a choir of five figures in the clouds. The crowning *cakra* is also framed by two garland-bearing winged figures.

The yogin is dressed in a rainbow-colored and richly brocaded Indian *dhotī* and adorned with bracelets, armbands, and earrings. The five *cakras* within his body are connected by four circles: from bottom to top, they are orange, red, yellow, and black. The lowest *cakra* has five petals. On its yellow pericarp there is a green rectangle, likely symbolic of the earth element, which is frequently represented as a square. Seated in

³¹ Bangdel and Huntington, *The Circle of Bliss*, 232. Images explicitly identifiable as Hāritī are relatively rare. In Nepal, she is synonymous with Śītalā, goddess of smallpox, and has a still very active temple at Swayambhunāth in the Kathmandu Valley. See Mary S. Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley* v. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 328-329; and Geoffrey Samuel, "Introduction: The Daughters of Hāritī Today," in *Daughters of Hāritī: Childbirth and Female Healers in South and Southeast Asia*, eds. Santi Rozario and Geoffrey Samuel (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1-5.

front of it are the white, four-armed deity Gaṇeśa and his consort, who is seated on his left thigh. According to Bangdel and Huntington, this arrangement is a Newar convention for suggesting sexual union, as distinct from the Tibetan mode, which invariably depicts pairs of deities embracing front to front, as is visible in the crown *cakra*. Gaṇeśa's lower right hand displays *varada mudrā*. The second *cakra* has six petals and pair of yellow deities on its blue pericarp. They are seated in the Newar manner on a white circle, symbolic of the water element. The male is seated in yogic posture with the soles of his feet together. He has four arms, the lower two of which combine *abhaya* and *varada mudrās* into *pratyudyana mudrā*, a gesture which Bangdel and Huntington describe as one of "welcoming (to a paradise world)."³² The third *cakra* has ten petals and a pair of red deities seated on a red, down-turned triangle on its yellow pericarp. The red triangle is symbolic of the fire element as well as of the Vajrayoginī cult. The fourth *cakra* has twelve petals and two interlocking green triangles on its red pericarp. According to Bangdel and Huntington, rather than sitting on his lap, the female is seated on her knees in front of the ithyphallic male. The fifth *cakra* has sixteen petals and a red pericarp with a single deity seated on a dais or lotus throne. The left side of the deity is green and male; the right side is red and female. According to Bangdel and Huntington, this bisected mode of representation is common only to Śiva Ardhanariśvara, a Hindu deity, and the *ḍākinīs* of the *Cakrasaṃvara* tradition, a fact which leads them to associate the painting with the latter, as it is clearly Buddhist. The white pair of deities in the sixth *cakra* is seated in sexual embrace on top of an elaborate lotus throne. The male is four-armed; his upper two arms hold skull-bowls and his

³² Bangdel and Huntington, *The Circle of Bliss*, 232.

lower two are arranged in *dharmacakra mudrā*, the gesture of teaching. The female holds a skull-bowl in her left hand and what appears to be a flaying knife in her right. Together, these two represent the idealized final stage of yogic visualization practice – that is, complete union with the divine, the realized goal of the standing yogin as well as, presumably, that of the intended audience of the painting as a whole.

Curiously, perhaps even remarkably, this painting has both a virtually identical twin featured in the Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art [Cat. no. 2], as well as a strikingly similar cousin in the John Gilmore Ford Collection [Cat. no. 3]. Both are also dated to the nineteenth-century. The former, according to John and Susan Huntington, is Nepalese, of the Shah style.³³ The Huntingtons also claim that the image represents the subtle body according to the Kagyu tradition, presumably because of the presence of a favorite among their founders, the yogi Milarepa. Truly, the painting's divergences from Cat. no. 1 are negligible. It depicts the four *Lokapālas* and what appear to be the same four *mahāsiddhas* in the same order, although in Cat. no. 2 the figure of Kapālapa is blue, rather than yellow. Additionally, diagonally above *Mahāsiddha* Campaka's head and to the left, there is a small image of a red deity standing on a lotus blossom and enclosed in a rainbow of light. This may be a representation of Vajrayoginī, as well as a visualization of the *mahāsiddha*'s. On either side of the yogin's shins is a monastery identical to the one in Cat. no. 1, complete with the black figure that may be Padma Sangye. The two mirrored scenes of the Tantric practitioner engaged in meditative visualization and the group with the *ḍākinī* and *Mahāsiddha* Luipa are also identical, although in Cat. no. 2 the dancing figures are

³³ See the description online at "The John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art," associated with The Ohio State University: <http://huntington.wmc.ohio-state.edu/public/index.cfm?fuseaction=showThisDetail&ObjectID=15000343>.

dressed in blue and red rather than orange. There is a portrait of Milarepa with his sacred vessel to the left of the yogin's hips and a portrait of Hva-Shang to the right. Above them are images of the goddesses Vasundharā on the left and Hāritī on the right, the only difference from Cat. no. 1 being that in Cat. no. 2, Vasundharā is white and Hāritī is yellow.

Predictably, the figure of the yogin is also virtually identical. Notably, however, while the configuration of the *cakras* and their attributes is consistent between the two paintings (i.e. with regard to the number of petals, the deities and their arrangement against a geometric shape), the colors of these elements are curiously inconsistent. For the most part, this is probably due to the artistic license of the painter, but in one case in particular it is potentially problematic. In the lowest *cakra*, Gaṇeśa and his consort are seated on an orange square outlined in blue [Fig. 2.6]. In Cat. no. 1, however, this square is green. This is significant because of the way in which color figures into most literary descriptions of the subtle body (and, presumably, Buddhist conceptions of the subtle body as a whole), not to mention the relevance of color to visualization practice, a quintessential feature of esoteric Buddhism. The *nāḍī* are invariably described in color, and their color is sometimes noted to be different inside and out, as well as contingent on their location within the body (such as above or below the navel). The *cakras* typically have a signature color and seed-syllable, which might also be colored.³⁴ It is from within these potent energy centers that one generates a *maṇḍala* [Fig. 2.7] or

³⁴ See, for example Chang, *Teachings of Tibetan Yoga*, 51-64; Wayman, "Female Energy and Symbolism," 171-184; Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals, and Forms* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 171-178; Gavin Kilty, "Brief Presentation of Channels, Winds, and Drops According to Kālacakra Tradition by Changkya Rölpa Dorjé," in *As Long as Space Endures: Essays on the Kālacakra Tantra in Honor of H.H. the Dalai Lama*, ed. Edward A. Arnold (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2009), 145-150; and Martin Brauen, *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism*, ex. cat. (New York: Rubin Museum of Art and Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2009), 155-169.

deity [Fig. 2.8] during meditation (see below), which is why it is striking that two such similar paintings depict the root *cakra* differently. Presumably, identical paintings would represent identical systems. Given how specific visualization instructions can be with regard to how the imagery of the subtle body is meant to be pictured in the mind of a practitioner, the same system is unlikely to yield inconsistent artistic representations.³⁵ So, why might such inconsistencies exist, and how significant, or insignificant, might they be?

We will return to these questions at length. Let us first consider the final painting in our trilogy of Himalayan *thangkas*. Little is known about Cat. no. 3 beyond the presumption that it was produced in Nepal or Tibet circa 1900. Like Cat. nos. 1 and 2 it depicts a centrally-placed, standing male yogin with five *cakras* superimposed on his body. Unlike the other two *thangkas*, however, the sixth *cakra* is depicted as an orb with a rainbow border that encloses the sacred syllable *oṃ*. Below the yogin's feet are representations of the four *Lokapālas*. Above them and to the left of the yogin's lower legs is the figure that Detlef-Ingo Lauf has identified as the *arhat* Hva-Shang, elaborated above.³⁶ Across from Hva-Shang is an unidentified Indian *Mahāsiddha* seated on a tiger skin and holding a rainbow of light. Above the rainbow is a small *stūpa*. Diagonally above these two figures, in the clouds on either side of the yogin's knees, is the image of a dark figure whom Lauf has identified as the eleventh-century Indian *guru* Dampa

³⁵ See n. 34 above. A second instance in which visual inconsistency is conspicuous occurs in the depiction of the fifth *cakra*. In both Cat. no. 1 and Cat. no. 2, the deity represented in this *cakra* is bisected. In Cat. no. 1, the left side of the deity is green and male and the right side is red and female. In Cat. no. 2, the colors are reversed, but the genders are unknown. So, either the color or the gender of the deities is inconsistent, which is notable a) because of the importance of correct visualization and b) because the Tantric conception of the body attaches a different gender to the right and left sides of the body, so the way in which gender is represented within this *cakra* could potentially have consequences for the image as a whole.

³⁶ See Lauf, *Verborgene Botschaft tibetischer Thangkas*, 90.

Sangye, the teacher of the Zhi-byed-pa sect and one of the figures associated with the foundation of Chöd practice.³⁷ Dampa Sangye is traditionally represented as dark in color with wild hair and characteristically Indian features, such as elongated earlobes and facial hair [Fig. 2.5].³⁸ Above his portraits, on either side of the yogin's midsection, there are two mirror images of a Tibetan monk engaged in Tantric ritual. These figures are shown enthroned beside a table bearing ritual implements. The monks hold a *vajra* in their lifted hands and a bell, or *ghaṇṭa* in their lowered hands. On the tables are a skull bowl, a flaying knife, and possibly a manuscript. Above the monk on the left is the twelve-armed deity Nāmasaṅgīti Mañjuśrī, recognizable by the book-bearing lotus in one of his left hands. He is flanked by a *siddha* and a monk. Mirroring this group on the right hand side of the composition, there is an image of a four-armed Avalokiteśvara, also flanked by a monk and a *siddha*. Above the two deities in each upper corner of the painting there is a choir of five figures. Both stand against a rainbow in a group of clouds. The crowning *cakra* is framed by garland-bearing figures.

The yogin is dressed in a multicolored Indian *dhotī* and adorned with bracelets, armbands, and earrings, as in the other two paintings. The five *cakras* within his body are connected by four light-colored circles.³⁹ The lowest *cakra* has five petals, one of which is light-colored. On its pericarp there is a square on which the deity Gaṇeśa and a consort are seated. The couple is composed in the Newar manner, in which sexual

³⁷ For a study of Dampa Sangye's iconography, and to a lesser extent, his contribution to Tibetan Buddhism, see Dan Martin, "Padampa Sangye: A History of Representation of a South Indian Siddha in Tibet," in *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*, ed. Rob Linrothe, ex. cat. (New York: Rubin Museum of Art and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2006), 109-123.

³⁸ Indian figures and figures depicted with "Indian" attributes are often included in Tibetan art in order to convey the legitimacy [i.e. the antiquity and Indian origin] of Tibetan practice. For example, see Christian Luczanits's discussion of the murals in the *Lukhang Temple, Lhasa*: "Locating Great Perfection: The Murals of the Lhasa Lukhang," *Orientalia* 42:2 (March 2001), 102-111.

³⁹ Lauf suggests that the two primary *nāḍī* as well as the *avadhūtī* are also visible in this image, but I believe he may have mistaken the rainbow borders of these connecting circles for the *nāḍī*.

union is suggested by the consort sitting on Gaṇeśa's thigh, as opposed to the Tibetan manner of embracing front-to-front. The second *cakra* has six petals and pair of light-colored deities on its pericarp. Although it is difficult to see definitively in this reproduction, this pair is likely seated on a white lotus symbolizing the water element, as in many of the second *cakra's yantra* forms. The third *cakra* has ten petals. A dark-colored deity and his lighter-colored consort sit on the down-turned triangle on its pericarp. The fourth *cakra* has twelve petals and two interlocking triangles on its pericarp. Notably, as in Cat. nos. 1 and 2, this divine pair appears to be arranged in a different manner than the lower three. Here, it seems that a light-colored male embraces a dark-colored female in the Tibetan manner. The fifth *cakra* has sixteen petals and a single deity sitting on a simple dais within its pericarp. Although it is difficult to see in this reproduction, this figure is most likely half male and half female (as in Cat no. 1 and, presumably, Cat no. 2). According to Lauf, the *bindu* on the yogin's forehead may represent a sixth *cakra*, in which case the encircled *om* would make a total of seven.⁴⁰

The elements which are consistent between all three of these paintings are the idealized figure of the yogin, the depiction of his subtle body, and his placement amidst a community of practitioners and deities. Let us briefly examine each of these elements so that we might shed light on the broader context of these images within Vajrayāna Buddhism. We have already characterized the yogi as a heroic figure, one who exists beyond the margins of conventional society in pursuit of an accelerated and difficult path to awakening. But how does he (or she) go about this way of life? What do yogis

⁴⁰ If he is correct, then perhaps the same is true of Cat. nos. 1 and 2 as well.

do? The most critical step for the aspiring practitioner is to seek out a teacher and request to be initiated as his (rarely, her) student. During initiation (*dīksā*), one is ritually transformed into a *śiṣya*, a son or daughter of the *kula* or divine family of the tradition's central deity, who the *guru* is understood to emanate.⁴¹ From this point on, the *śiṣya* endeavors to become proficient in reciting *mantras*, performing rituals, and engaging in basic visualization practices, principally that of generating the central deity's signature *maṇḍala* [Fig. 2.7]. The *maṇḍala* is understood to be a representation of the enlightened cosmos of which the initiate has now become an integral part.⁴² It simultaneously corresponds to the universe, the sacred geography of the earth, the community of practitioners, and the adept's own body parts and bodily constituents.⁴³ The practice of meditatively constructing the image of the *maṇḍala* is crucial to esoteric practice. Eventually, the goal is for the adept to visualize him- or herself as a

⁴¹ During initiation, the initiate is implanted with the divine "seed" of the guru, which is understood to contain and transfer to the initiate the guru's capacity for transcendental understanding, or "liberating insight" – Geoffrey Samuel's term throughout *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). This "seed," associated with the *guru's bodhicitta*, mind or thought of enlightenment, can also signify the combined sexual fluids of the *guru* and his consort (white and red *bodhicitta*). White, among others, argues that ritual sexual acts were once a definitive feature of Tantric traditions and initially utilized by Tantric practitioners in order to generate sexual fluids, understood to be extremely potent, transformative substances. He further argues that over time these practices were "aestheticized," and while sexual symbolism persisted, it was no longer meant to be taken literally. See White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in Its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), passim. There is still some debate about the extent to which actual sexual practices were utilized in Tantric Buddhist circles. Alexis Sanderson argues that such symbolism did indeed reflect actual practice, and that initiations included both the *guru* and the initiate participating in ritual intercourse with female consorts. See Sanderson, "Vajrayāna: Origin and Function," 89-91. See also Jacob Dalton, "The Development of Perfection: The Interiorization of Buddhist Ritual in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 1-30.

⁴² For a thorough description of the function and symbolism of *maṇḍalas* in Tibetan religious culture, see Brauen, *Mandala*, passim. For their significance in Buddhist culture more broadly, see Denise Patry Leidy and Robert A. F. Thurman, *Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment*, ex. cat. (New York: Asia Society Galleries and Tibet House, Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

⁴³ For example, in the *Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala*, the goddess Mahāvīryā and her consort Vajrasattva, located in the Body Wheel of the *maṇḍala*, are also thought to abide in the Southeast corner of the Underworld, which corresponds to the city of Kulatā, and to the knees and the mucus of the human body. See Gray, "Mandala of the Self: Embodiment, Practice and Identity Construction in the Cakrasaṃvara Tradition," *The Journal of Religious History* 30, no. 3 (October 2006), table no. 1.

manifestation of the central deity, for example Guhyasamāja, Heruka, Kālacakra, or Vajrayoginī. This practice of visualization, worship, and eventual unification with the deities in the *maṇḍala*, called *devayoga*, constitutes what is known as the yoga of Generation or Creation (*utpattikrama*).

It is important to emphasize the extent to which the identity of the practitioner is utterly transformed through such practice. In his discussion of the ideal Tantric practitioner as expressed in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, a circa eighth-century *sādhana* or ritual manual, Glenn Wallis characterizes this transformation as largely a result of ritual action and performance, noting that “by performing prescribed rituals, [the practitioner, or *sādhaka*] is fulfilling and completing the career codified by a given cult.”⁴⁴ The practitioner lives as a mendicant and an ascetic, begging alms and imitating the Buddha’s renunciation of the world (which ultimately led to his awakening). He or she enacts a “fusion” of the “ancient *śramaṇa* with the early Mahāyāna *bodhisattva*... a *yogi-bodhisattva* who devote[s] himself fully to the ‘perfection of wisdom’ and the acquisition of supernatural powers and knowledge (*ṛddhi* and *abhijñā*) for the purpose of benefitting the world.”⁴⁵ Though Wallis’s characterization of the *sādhaka* is useful and pragmatic, it emphasizes the role of the practitioner as proscribed from without and underplays the power of *devayoga* to transform him or her from within. According to David Gray, not only does this practice “strengthen one’s sense of identity with [the] cosmos that is the mandala, and the divinities who reside within it,” it also overcomes a deeply-ingrained perception of the body as incurably foul and an impediment to

⁴⁴ Wallis, *Mediating the Power of Buddhas*, 129.

⁴⁵ Wallis, *Mediating the Power of Buddhas*, 128.

awakening.⁴⁶ In visualizing one's body as a divine abode, even one's bile, pus and sweat are sanctified and facilitate awakening. Similarly, when visualizing oneself as a fierce deity, human feelings of wrath and lust are experienced as expressions of divine states of being, such that "fierceness will be directed not against others, but rather, it will ravage one's own inner adversaries of ignorance, desire, and hatred."⁴⁷ Thus, in the context of Vajrayāna Buddhism, aspects of human existence once perceived to be polluting and painful are utilized in the service of liberation.

Through devotion and successful practice of these preliminary stages, the adept becomes eligible for additional initiations and more advanced teachings. The highest level of Tantric Buddhist practice, the yoga of Completion (*niṣpannakrama*, *saṃpannakrama*), expands these visualizations and incorporates the direct manipulation of the subtle body.⁴⁸ In this practice, one of the goals of the yogin or yoginī is to kindle the energetic force (sometimes personified as the goddess *Caṇḍālī*) that lies dormant in the lower half of the body. Then, one uses the breath to draw it up the central channel (*avadhūtī*), piercing each of the *cakras* in turn, and culminating in the unification of the once-dormant but now-blazing force with the transcendent consciousness located in the highest *cakra* at the crown of the head. In order to accomplish this cultivation of inner heat (Tibetan *gtum mo*), one must redirect the winds (Skt. *prāṇa*, Tib. *rlung*) that normally flow in the outer *nāḍī* (the *rāsanā* and the *lalanā*) and draw them together in the central channel where they can facilitate the movement between the upper and

⁴⁶ Gray, *Mandala of the Self*, 302.

⁴⁷ Daniel Cozort, "Sādhana (*sGrub thabs*): Means of Achievement for Deity Yoga," in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, eds. José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1996), 335.

⁴⁸ For descriptions of the hierarchical arrangement of teachings and practices within the Buddhist Tantras, see Dalton, "The Development of Perfection," *passim*, and Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 258-268 and 285-289.

lower halves of the body.⁴⁹ At each of the *cakras*, the *nāḍī* intersect and form knots or obstructions (*graṅṭhi*) which “block the free flow through the channels, thus blocking consciousness from attaining higher levels of insight;” and, therefore, “one aim of tantric yoga is to untangle these knots so that free flow can take place through the channels.”⁵⁰ The obstructions that occur in the subtle body are understood to be manifestations of mental poisons like ignorance and negative emotion, meaning that physical impediments have correlates in the mind, and vice versa. When all such obstructions are purged from the body through a combination of visualization, physical exercises (Tib. *phrul khor* or *yantra* yoga), and subtle body techniques, awakening is inevitable. Significantly, subtle body practices are regarded as even more effective at this process of destroying obstacles to enlightenment than visualization alone, although they are also known to be more difficult and more dangerous, and therefore guarded with extreme secrecy and available only to the most advanced practitioners.

Martin Brauen eloquently highlights the sophisticated relationship between traditions that privilege visionary meditative practice and visual representation:

[Vajrayāna] Buddhism relies on the visual with an intensity that far exceeds other forms of the religion... Tibetan Buddhist practitioners engage in special practices in order to realize the pure in what was previously viewed as impure, realizing buddhas where before they knew only of ordinary beings. Vastly complex pictorial representations of the Buddhist conception of the world and its deities serve as aids to the meditator. Figures of deities – be they painted on walls or cloth or fashioned out of metal, wood or clay – are endowed through consecration to stand in for the deities they represent, enabling the

⁴⁹ See Samuel, “The Subtle Body in India and Beyond,” 41-42.

⁵⁰ Samuel, “Body and Mind in Tibetan Medicine and Tantric Buddhism,” in *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine*, ed. Theresia Hofer, ex. cat. (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2014), 34.

practitioner to properly visualize the reality he or she strives to embody.⁵¹

Perhaps the intended audience for our three Himalayan *thangkas* [Cat nos. 1-3] was oriented towards the practice of visualizing and identifying with the idealized figure of the yogin in the center. However, unlike paintings of *maṇḍalas* and deities [Fig. 2.7 and 2.8], the central figure in these images is not a figure to be worshipped, but a virtual self-portrait of the human adept as he or she is to visualize and understand his or her own body as it exists at the most subtle level. In addition, not only do the paintings represent how the yogin is to see him- or herself during the practice of meditation, but also how the yogin is to picture him- or herself within the expanded world of the practical tradition: as a member of a divine family composed of deities and their retinues as well as all other initiates past and present. Given this environment, within and without the paintings themselves, images like these may function as maps for a *guru* to contextualize practice for a new initiate. Significantly, these paintings are not devotional or narrative, like all other categories of *thangka* painting arguably are, rather, they are primarily instructional. With remarkable economy, they present a totalizing vision that includes an entire yogic worldview from top to bottom, from the more humble human actors to the idealized image of the yogin with the *cakras* of his subtle body, to the deities who transmit the teachings to the human realm and its community of practitioners, to the ultimate gnosis or realization of those teachings that is symbolized by the highest *cakra* at the crown of the yogin's head. Finally, the inconsistencies in the representation of the root *cakra* mentioned above may suggest that the patrons of these images were more interested in conveying the figure of the

⁵¹ Braeun, *Mandala*, 26-28.

yogin as part of a community than in displaying their tradition's particular conception of the subtle body, the precise nature of which is usually reserved for an elite few.

The Didactic Body

In contrast to the Himalayan *thangkas*, Cat. no. 4 is a true diagram of the subtle body. This Nepalese painting is made of opaque watercolor on cotton cloth and is currently located in the Bhaktapur National Museum. It depicts a standing male yogin with *cakras* superimposed on his body in a vertical line. Above the figure's head, the *cakras*, represented in *yantra* form, continue in a column. Dina Bangdel and John Huntington attribute the painting to the "Rajput-derived style" of nineteenth-century Nepal, due to the distinctive facial features and moustache.⁵² The first *cakra* of the subtle body, located just below the yogin's pelvis, is depicted as a yellow square with two half-*vajras* extending from each of its four corners. Within the square is a four-petaled lotus. The second *cakra* is represented by a white semi-circle. Bangdel and Huntington suggest the form is an abstract rendering of a skull-bowl, in which the horizontal red shape represents the bowl's being filled with blood, a familiar image in Tantric art. On the side of the bowl there is a six-petaled lotus. At each of its two corners, there is a white, eight-petaled lotus. The third *cakra* is represented by a down-turned red triangle. Within it is a ten-petaled lotus. The fourth *cakra* is represented as a pair of interlocking green triangles. Within them is a twelve-petaled lotus. The fifth *cakra* consists of two concentric blue circles, within each of which there is a sixteen-petaled lotus.

⁵² Bangdel and Huntinton, *The Circle of Bliss*, 234.

The remaining *cakras* are less distinguishable from one another. The down-turned red triangle on top of the yogin's head and the red-tipped petals that fan away from it likely represent the thousand-petaled lotus *cakra* at the crown of the head.⁵³ Upon it, there is a white spiral *bindu*. Between the yogin's eyes, the area often referred to as the "third eye," there is a down-turned triangle that is half-white, half-red. Partially superimposed upon it is a white spiral *bindu*. Above this, on the yogin's forehead, there is a blue-black "X" shape. Above this, protruding from beneath what could be called the yogin's hairline, there are three small tail-like shapes. The one on the far left is red, and the other two are white. These may represent the three primary *nāḍī* (Tib. *rtsa*): the *rasanā*, the *lalanā* and the *avadhūtī*. The *bindu* may represent the "drops" (Tib. *thig le*) associated with *bodhicitta*, the subtle substance which is carried on the winds (Skt. *prāṇā*, Tib. *rlung*) and redirected throughout the body in order to destroy obstructions and effect awakening.⁵⁴ This highly refined type of yogic practice, known in Tibet as *rtsa rlung*, is particularly prevalent in the Tibetan cultural sphere, where it is associated with *'phrul 'khor* or *yantra yoga*.⁵⁵

Immediately above the yogin's head [Cat. no. 4], there is a group of red symbols: a "U" shape with two circles on either side and two horizontal bars above it. Above this, there is a blue-black circle. Above the circle is a curious red shape reminiscent of the syllable "om," especially when considered along with the white crescent and red drop

⁵³ Bangdel and Huntington also suggest that the triangle associates the image with Vajravarahī, *The Circle of Bliss*, 234.

⁵⁴ See Brauen, *Mandala*, 155-169, and Kilty, "Brief Presentation of Channels, Winds, and Drops According to Kālacakra Tradition," 145-150, for useful discussions of the workings of the drops and winds. Note, however, that Cat. no. 4 is clearly not associated with the *Kālacakra* tradition, in which the description of the subtle body is quite different.

⁵⁵ For a fascinating case study of the state of *rtsa rlung* and *'phrul 'khor* in contemporary Tibet, see Andrea Loseries-Leick, "Psychich Sports – A Living Tradition in Contemporary Tibet?," in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 7th International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995*, v. 2, eds. H. Krasser, M. T. Much, E. Steinkellner and H. Tauscher (Wein: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 583- 593.

above it, which could represent the horizontal bar and *anusvāra* of the *devanāgarī* script (a similar configuration of shapes appears in the highest *cakra* in Cat. no. 3). It is particularly compelling to read these shapes as abstracted syllables given the way in which seed syllables are used to generate shapes and images during meditative visualization.⁵⁶ Above this group, there is another blue-black “X” and a white spiral *bindu*. Next, there is a horizontally-oriented black rectangle outlined in red. Above this, there is a down-turned red triangle with a red circle on either side. Above the triangle, there is a white spiral *bindu*, a white crescent, and another white spiral *bindu*. Next, there is a series of six blue-black circles overlaid with a golden, thread-like line. These circles increase in size, slightly, from bottom to top. They are superimposed upon a second set of six blue circles. The second, background set is quite faint and, in contrast, its circles decrease in size from bottom to top. Above the topmost circle is another white spiral *bindu*. Finally, the image is crowned with a golden teardrop.

Many elements of the *cakras* within the figure of the yogin correspond to those in Cat. nos. 1-3. For example, the basic shapes of the lower five, which from bottom to top are a square, a circle, a down-turned red triangle, a pair of interlocking green triangles, and another circle (a circular throne or dais in Cat. nos. 1-3), are the same, as are their number of lotus petals, with the exception of the root *cakra*. Additionally, the bisected triangle depicted between the figure’s eyebrows recalls the bisected, half-male, half-female deity depicted in the other images as inhabiting the throat *cakra*. This might signify that in the tradition which produced this image, the union of male and

⁵⁶ For a curious, descriptive example of this process in which a “moon” (a crescent?) and above it a “dot” are generated from a *visarga* and an *anusvāra*, respectively, see Brauen’s discussion of a cosmic *maṇḍala* in Brauen, *Mandala*, 179-180.

female aspects of the body is believed to occur at the forehead.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, though, there is little else to be gleaned from this painting, as the symbols above the yogin's head are highly enigmatic. It is possible, however, to speculate that this image does present, to a much greater extent than Cat. nos. 1-3, a very specific conceptualization of the subtle anatomy that is perhaps impossible to understand fully without the guidance of an experienced *guru*.

The Subtle Body: Practice and Representation

Without question, Cat. no. 5 (the eleventh-century Tibetan paintings with which we are already familiar) is also highly enigmatic, its meaning almost certainly veiled by the figure of an individual *guru*. These two images are painted on either side of a single piece of paper. Radio-carbon analysis has secured the date of its production to the eleventh-century. On the recto is a human figure of ambiguous gender with six *cakras* superimposed on his or her body. The left hand holds a mirror emblazoned with a *swastika*. The boar's head emerging from the head of the figure may associate the image with Vajravaraha or Vajravarahī. On the verso there are eleven *cakras* or symbols arranged in a vertical column. In part, these correspond to symbolic descriptions of the cosmos and its elemental constituents as expressed in both Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, a fourth- or fifth-century treatise, as well as in the *Kālacakra Tantra*, composed around the same time as the paintings themselves were made. According to Pratapaditya Pal and Amy Heller, the facial features and proportions of the figure on the recto indicate that the paintings are stylistically related to early schools of

⁵⁷ As mentioned above in n. 41, in the Tantric context, the juxtaposition of white and red specifically connotes male and female aspects, semen and menstrual blood.

Kashmiri artists working in Western Tibet.⁵⁸ The two inscriptions on the verso indicate that the image was made for or by a monk named Zhi ba ‘od.⁵⁹

The inscriptions on the recto side refer to ritual practices associated with specific *cakras*, as well as identify their respective seed-syllables. The lowest *cakra* is a white triangle marked with the single syllable ‘e’. The second *cakra* is a horizontal blue bow shape with red flags fluttering from either end and marked with the syllable ‘yam’. An elongated red triangle above the bowstring is partially obscured by the third *cakra*. The imagery of the third *cakra* is particularly complex. Within the pericarp of a white, sixty-four-petaled lotus there is a red *swastika* obscured by a white triangle. Superimposed on the triangle, there is a spiraled, yellow serpent evocative of the Hindu goddess *Kuṇḍalinī*. The serpent’s mouth appears to be clamped over two ribbon-like shapes, one red and one white, meant to represent the right and left channels of the subtle body.⁶⁰ Alongside these channels are two other ribbon-like vertical shapes, one blue and one yellow, which continue as black lines up through the yogin’s nostrils and into the *cakra* at the crown of the head. Similarly, a faint black line runs the length of the figure’s midline from the top of the third *cakra* through a tiny *bindu* on the yogin’s forehead and up to the crown. The inscription on the periphery of the lotus pericarp reads, “Om Om Om Sarva Buddha dakini Ye Bazdraā pani bee ro tsa ni ye hum hum phat phat phat sva ha,” and is apparently a *mantra* invoking Vajrayoginī, Vajrapāṇi and

⁵⁸ Heller, “Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations,” 59, and Pal, *The Arts of Kashmir*, 105.

⁵⁹ Heller assumes this individual to be Pho brag Zhi ba ‘od, the prince of Guge (1016-1111) who was ordained as a royal monk at age 46. Thus, she concludes that these paintings are evidence of the previously undocumented transmission of esoteric Indian cultic ideas within the royal family of Guge, although this remains highly speculative.

⁶⁰ In Hindu yogic symbolism, the dormant *Kuṇḍalinī* who restricts the *nāḍī* in this way is understood to drain the vital forces from the body so that the individual is subject to death and decay, the natural flow of time. Awakening the *Kuṇḍalinī* reverses this flow such that the yogi transcends and triumphs over time. Mastering the flow of yogic time, one achieves immortality. See White, *Alchemical Body*, 218-262.

Vairocana.⁶¹ Two other inscriptions refer to this *cakra* as the “cakra of the whirling turquoise” (*phyi g.yu ru ‘khyil pa ‘i ca kra*), and the “circle of the wisdom belly/navel” (*lte/lto ba ye shes kyi ‘khor lo*). The figure’s right arm is bent so as to appear to be holding the fourth *cakra* at the heart, which is represented as an eight-petaled lotus with alternating blue and red petals. On its white pericarp there are two interlocking red triangles labeled with the syllable ‘*hri*.’ Two inscriptions identify this *cakra* as the “cakra of the exoteric *gtor ma* offering” (*phyi gtor ma ‘i ca kra*) and the “cakra of the Dharma, the heart” (*snying ga chos kyi ca kra*). The fifth *cakra* is represented as a white, twenty-four-petaled lotus with a red triangle on its pericarp. Its inscription labels it as the “cakra of the exoteric/outer offering” (*phyi ‘mcod pa ‘i ca kra*). The white circle marked with a *swastika* in the yogin’s left hand is labeled as the “cakra of the arm, mirror-like wisdom” (*me long yees/ye shes dpung gi ca kra*). The highest *cakra* is represented as a red circle upon which there is a grid of forty-nine syllables. On each of its right and left sides there are three concentric circles rendered in profile. The outer two of these are white and the center is black. This imagery is highly unusual and its exact significance is as yet unknown. Two inscriptions identify this *cakra* as “the cakra of great joy,” and “the cakra of the assembly of letters of the exoteric ritual” (*bde’ ba chen po ‘i ca kra*; *phyi yi gi btu’ ba ‘i ca kra*). Significantly, the *cakra* inscriptions mention specific ritual practices that may allude to the overall function of the paintings. For example, *phyi mchod*, mentioned at the throat *cakra*, is the offering of material substances such as incense,

⁶¹ All inscriptions and their translations are reproduced from those in Heller, “Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations.”

butter lamps, flowers, and *gtor ma* or ritual cakes (mentioned at the heart *cakra*) for the purpose of generating merit and appeasing or courting deities.⁶²

The verso side consists of eleven symbols that represent a sort of cosmic diagram. During meditation, practitioners methodically generate a vision the universe successively from its constituent elements, invoked through the recitation of specific seed-syllables and *mantras*. The shapes in this diagram correspond to the elements of emptiness or ether, wind, fire, water, and earth, as well as to the divine cosmic mountain Sumeru, at the apex of which one would construct a deity's *maṅḍala* palace. The lowest few symbols strongly resemble the bottom three *cakras* on the recto, which suggests that the human figure is understood to represent a microcosmic view of the symbolically-rendered cosmos on the verso. The lowest of these symbols is a red triangle labeled with the syllable 'e' (as in the lowest *cakra* on the recto). Its apex pierces an eight-petaled lotus with a yellow pericarp and alternating blue and red petals, labeled with the syllable 'baṃ.' Above the lotus is a blue bow shape tipped with red flags (like in the recto) and labeled with the syllable 'yaṃ.' Next is a red triangle that is outlined with flames (again, like in the recto) and marked with the syllable 'raṃ.' Above it are two concentric circles, red on the outside and white on the inside, labeled 'baṃ.' Above the circle are four successive squares. From the outermost square they are red, white, green, and yellow, and labeled with the syllable 'laṃ.' Next is a symbolic representation of Mount Sumeru ('suṃ') in which there are three concentric circles enclosing five "staves" that may represent the five elements: earth, fire, water, wind, and space or ether. Above this is an eight-petaled lotus with red petals and a yellow

⁶² See John Makransky, "Offering (*mChod pa*) in Tibetan Ritual Literature," in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, eds. José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1996), 312-330.

pericarp, labeled ‘*baṃ.*’ Next is a black *viśva-vajra* enclosing a blue square labeled ‘*huṃ.*’ Above it is a vertical black *vajra* labeled ‘*baṃ.*’ The penultimate symbol is a red sun disc labeled ‘*ka li,*’ and the topmost symbol is a white moon disc labeled ‘*a li.*’

Heller describes these paintings as representing the “Abhidharmic universe” as expressed in a late-eleventh- or early-twelfth-century Vajrayoginī *sādhana* text.⁶³ While several of the elements in that text do appear to correspond to those in the paintings (for example, the “fluttering flag marking both tips” of a semicircle, the triangle “marked with flame,” and a sun and moon disc), the visualization instructions (such as the description of Mount Sumeru) and several of the seed syllables do not correspond.⁶⁴ Also significant is the fact that Vajrayoginī is expressly associated with down-turned triangles, of which there are none in these paintings.⁶⁵ Curiously, though, a short section from a *Kālacakra sādhana* reproduced by Martin Brauen in *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* also describes a “bow-shaped” disc adorned with “a banner of victory,” and a fiery triangle perhaps marked with a shape that Brauen assumes to be a *swastika*.⁶⁶

The inscriptions on the verso identify the monk Zhi ba ‘od and shed some light on the paintings’ intended use. The inscription on the left alludes to “body clues/signs painted (to indicate) the basis of the mirror divination practice, made/written by the aged royal monk,” (*rgya/rgyal slong dgan pas pro mo spyad pa ‘i bleng bzhis brgyud ‘pa’ lus*

⁶³ Heller, “Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations,” 59.

⁶⁴ English, *Vajrayoginī*, 144-151.

⁶⁵ For example, see English, *Vajrayoginī*, 149.

⁶⁶ See Brauen, *Mandala*, 179-180. The text cited – “Abbreviated method for Actualizing (the Nine-deity) Kālacakra, Cycles of Time, one who has overcome and gained all: A Treasure House of Gems,” authored by the Third Panchen Lama, Lobzang Palden Yeshe (1738-1780) – appears to be relatively obscure. An English translation from 1985 by Alexander Berzin can be found online at: http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/kalachakra/practice_texts/sadhanas/abbreviated_9_deity_kc_sadhana.html. The relevant section is entitled “Supreme Triumphant Symbolic Round World Generation.” See also the section titled “Consecrating Inner Offering.”

rgyus).⁶⁷ The more lengthy inscription on the right is from the perspective of Zhi ba ‘od speaking to his son:

Concerning the basis of the painted (diagram), understand that it is the essential points of the body. You Shud bu Ser skya ma, son of Shud pu Zhi ba ‘od, because I am close to dying, look (at this diagram)! Having spend my life (as) Shud bu Zhi ba ‘od, (now) I also die. I studied all the sutra and piṭaka in front of the (teacher who is like) Buddha Kāśyapa, in all of India east and west there is none more knowledgeable than me in mirror divination and logic.⁶⁸

In these inscriptions, Zhi ba ‘od presents himself as an expert in the practice of mirror divination. In addition, he alludes to the fact that the “points of the body” depicted in the diagram are to be used to teach aspects of this practice. It may then be the case that all of the inscriptions on these paintings describe rituals revolving around the practice of mirror divination (Tib. *pro mo*, Skt. *prasenā*, *pratisenā*).

Giacomella Orofino discusses the practice of mirror divination as it is described in the *Sekoddeśa* of the *Kālacakramūlatantra*.⁶⁹ She characterizes mirror divination (*prasenā*) as a sort of folk visionary technique used in this text as a metaphor for the super-mundane perception of yogis to whom extraordinary visions may frequently appear. However, Orofino also discusses the actual practice in which there are some compelling correspondences to our paintings. In the *Subāhyaparipṛcchānāmatantra*, a

⁶⁷ An alternate reading of this inscription, which necessitates changing “*pro mo*” to “*sro mo*,” is: “tendons/ or nerves of the body, account of the examination of heat, made by the aged royal monk.” Heller, “Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations,” 66. This reading suggests the yogic practice of *gtum mo* (Tib.), generating inner heat.

⁶⁸ *lus gnas yin ‘gos rgyus pa ‘i ‘bye zhi ni shud pu zhi ba ‘od gi bu shud p user skya ma de de bzhin 2 bshegs pa ‘od srungs gi drung du mdo sde sde snod ma lus slabs nas rgya kar shar nub na pra dang tshad ma 3 nga bas ‘khas na med/ shud bu zhi ba ‘od tshe ‘i dus byas ‘chi yang bu khyod ‘gra’ (‘grab’) yod pas lta;* Heller, “Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations,” 66.

⁶⁹ See Giacomella Orofino, “Divination with Mirrors: Observations on a Simile Found in the Kālacakra Literature,” in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th International Association for Tibetan Studies, Fagernes 1992* v. 2, ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research on Human Culture, 1994), 612-628.

seventh century text composed in Kashmir (which is, according to Pal and Heller, the presumed origin of our artists – see above), *prasenā* requires a medium, a young virgin, male or female, to behold the mirror and reveal its visionary content.⁷⁰ It also requires numerous offerings, specifically blue *gtor ma* and many snakes, which, notably, is significant to both the imagery and the inscriptions of the *cakras* in Cat. no. 5. Furthermore, the yogic practitioner who is able to access the visions revealed through mirror divination is characterized as one who practices seminal retention – that is, postponing ejaculation during ritual intercourse. This is significant to the highest *cakra* in Cat. no. 5, described as “the *cakra* of great bliss” (Skt. *Mahāsukha*) reflecting the sexual soteriology of early Vajrayāna Buddhism in which the bliss of enlightenment was equated with or enacted as the bliss of orgasm.⁷¹ The context of both ritual offering and the practice of seminal retention with respect to mirror divination is retained in Nāropa’s much later commentary on the *Sekoddeśa*, which is important to recognize as we have noted that the *Kālacakra* literature may have been significant to the makers of these paintings.⁷²

Unfortunately, Heller does not fully acknowledge the clear import of specific ritual practices related to mirror divination, which is evident from the inscriptions on these images. She regards the mention of Zhi ba ‘od’s death as indicative of “post mortem rituals” which he may have intended for his son to carry out.⁷³ It seems clear, however, that these paintings represent the aged monk conferring his specialist’s

⁷⁰ This early *Kriyātantra* was translated into Tibetan circa the eight-century. See Orofino, “Divination with Mirrors,” 614-615 and 621 n. 22.

⁷¹ See Dalton, “The Development of Perfection,” *passim*.

⁷² See Orofino, “Divination with Mirrors,” 612-613.

⁷³ Heller, “Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations,” 54-66. Pal echoes this sentiment, stating that the paintings may have been created in the context of “death-delaying ritual,” Pal, *The Arts of Kashmir*, 105.

knowledge of ritual and the subtle body to his son in anticipation of his own death. Some of the qualities of that knowledge can be gleaned from studying these paintings carefully. Their most salient features include 1) the identifiable Hindu forms that reflect the transmission of Indian ideas to Tibet and the diverse religious background Vajrāyana Buddhism (the *swastika* and the coiled serpent), 2) the significance of ritual action and its dependence on an understanding of the subtle body (the “points of the body” are in part described in terms of their relationship to ritual practice), 3) the heavily local character of practice and representation with regard to the subtle body (the hybridized Tibetan and Sanskrit inscriptions; the striking dissimilarity to other images of the subtle body, Buddhist or Hindu), and 4) the secrecy with which this highly esoteric knowledge is protected (knowledge is committed to paper under threat of its being lost with the death of its guardian, Zhi ba ‘od). Thus, despite these paintings’ potential correspondences with certain ritual texts, this combination of characteristics has nothing to do with texts at all, but rather with practice and experience as mediated by a single living teacher, the gatekeeper of tradition.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study has been to instigate a conversation about Buddhist visual culture pertaining to yoga and the subtle body. In the course of this undertaking, a few things have become clear. First, previous attempts to discuss Buddhist representations of the subtly body have been encumbered by an inappropriate literary framework – the tendency to regard such images as illustrations of specific Buddhist texts. As a result, such images, until the present study, had yet to be considered carefully for their unique value as images. This fact is particularly puzzling given the growing interest in the esoteric traditions these images reflect and speaks to the extent to which contemporary understanding of such traditions might be still poor, or, at least, misguided. In addition, it seems apparent that these images are indeed rare, although whether they were seldom made or seldom circulated far beyond their makers remains unknown.⁷⁴ It may be that this scarcity is a result of the deep commitment to secrecy that characterizes esoteric traditions past and present. *Gurus* and initiates are known to guard their knowledge fiercely, under oath, and sometimes even under pain of death.⁷⁵ This is in part due to a desire to maintain the purity of the

⁷⁴ The only other clearly Buddhist representation of the subtle body I have encountered was shown briefly as a slide during a presentation given by Ian A. Baker entitled “Embodying Enlightenment: Yoga and Physical Culture in Tibetan Buddhism,” on March 23, 2014 at a conference celebrating the opening of *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine*, an exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York. When I inquired after the image, Baker declined to share any information about it, stating that he had been expressly forbidden to do so by the Lama who gave it to him.

⁷⁵ For example, see Loseries-Leick, “Psychic Sports – A Living Tradition in Contemporary Tibet?,” in which Loseries-Leick recounts her own struggle to procure information from teachers and practitioners as well as describes the sense of anxiety and threat that accompanies the disclosure of such knowledge.

teaching lineage, but also as protection for novice or uninitiated practitioners against the potential dangers of variegated transformative practice.

The paintings that are available to us are quite disparate: three images that are likely from the same tradition and two rather bizarre outliers, separated from each other by nearly a millennium. It is clear, however, that these images reflect aspects of Tantric practice that lie outside the boundaries of canonical texts. It is also reasonable to assume that they are all didactic tools – visual aids in the transmission of esoteric knowledge related to yogic practice. In this regard, Cat. nos. 1-3 seem to function somewhat differently from Cat nos. 4 and 5. The three former *thangkas* depicting a yogin surrounded by a community of practitioners and deities represent the yogin as a completely realized being – an idealized practitioner who has achieved both union with the divine and harmony within the praxical environment. These images, therefore, convey a ‘big-picture’ perspective of the tradition, a macroscopic view of the yogin’s universe. In contrast, Cat. nos. 4 and 5 depict the figure of the yogin in isolation, and the representation of *cakras* in these images is far more abstract. These features suggest that these two paintings served a more specialized goal, perhaps conveying specific techniques or instructions for visualization. Finally, keeping in mind that speculation about the subtle body spans more than two millennia, we must acknowledge that theories about it were highly diverse, thus diversity in representation should be expected. Such inconsistencies are reflected in the depiction of *cakras* as deities in Cat. nos. 1-3 and *yantras* in Cat. nos. 4 and 5, as well as in the strikingly dissimilar symbols depicted in Cat. nos. 4 and 5.

There are many possible avenues for further study of these images, the most compelling of which might be a comparison with the circa late-seventeenth-century mural paintings on the third floor of “The Dalai Lama’s Secret Temple,” the *Lukhang* in Lhasa.⁷⁶ Among the scenes depicted on the walls of the *Lukhang* are portraits of yogis engaged in various ritual, alchemical, and yogic practices, including *rtsa rlung*, *‘phrul ‘khor*, and *gtum mo* [Fig. 3.1]. Additionally, this visual program may reflect the revisionary, systematizing agenda of the brilliant Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705), advisor to the Fifth Dalai Lama and long-term regent of Tibet who contributed much to the status of the *Kālacakra Tantra* as a necessary compliment to Tibetan medical literature and Tibetan religious culture more broadly.⁷⁷ This is significant due to the extent to which (the contemporary understanding of) the *Kālacakra Tantra* seems to have influenced the contemporary understanding of the subtle body with regard to Tibetan material, in particular.⁷⁸ It is hoped that the present study has at least shed some light on this unique body of imagery from an Art Historical perspective, and therefore a worthwhile contribution to the broader study of the Buddhist Art of the subtle body.

⁷⁶ See Ian A. Baker, *The Dalai Lama’s Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings from Tibet* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), and Luczanits, “Locating Great Perfection,” noted above.

⁷⁷ See Kurtis R. Schaeffer, “Textual Scholarship, Medical Tradition, and Mahāyāna Buddhist Ideals in Tibet,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31 (2003): 621-641; and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, “Medicine, Astrology, and Divination,” in *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine*, ed. Theresia Hoffer, ex. cat. (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2014), 91-105.

⁷⁸ For example, see Brauen, *Mandala*, passim, and Samuel, “Body and Mind in Tibetan Medicine and Tantric Buddhism,” 32-45.

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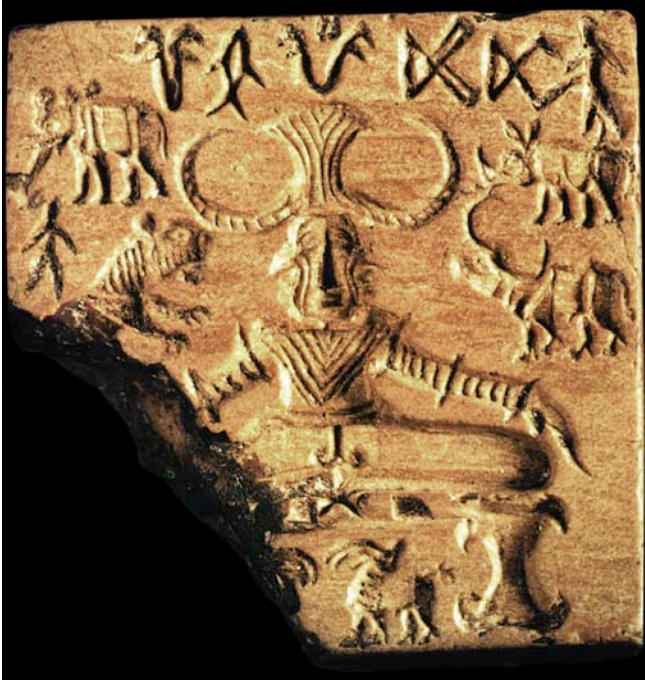


Fig. 1.1
Indus Valley Seal # 420

Mohenjo-Daro, Pakistan
 2200-1800 BCE



Fig. 2.1
Mahāsiddha Caurāṅgipa

Robert Beer, 1998
 Keith Dowman, trans, *Buddhist
 Masters of Enchantment: The Lives
 and Legends of the Mahasiddhas*
 (Rochester, Vermont: Inner
 Traditions, 1998), 64.



Fig. 2.2
Mahāsiddha Acīnta

Robert Beer, 1998
Keith Dowman, trans, *Buddhist Masters of Enchantment: The Lives and Legends of the Mahasiddhas* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1998), 120.



Fig. 2.3
Mahāsiddha Rāhula

Lamdre Chapel, South Wall
Palkhor Tsuglagkhang, Gyantse, Tibet; 15th Century
Ulrich Von Schroeder,
Empowered Masters: Tibetan Wall Paintings of Mahāsiddhas at Gyantse (Chicago: Serindia Publications and Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2006), plate no. 38.



Fig. 2.4
Arhat Hwa-Shang

Tibet, c. 1425
British Museum
Marylin M. Rhie and Robert A. F. Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet, Expanded Edition*, ex. cat. (New York: Tibet House New York and Harry N. Abrams, 1996), cat. no. 14.

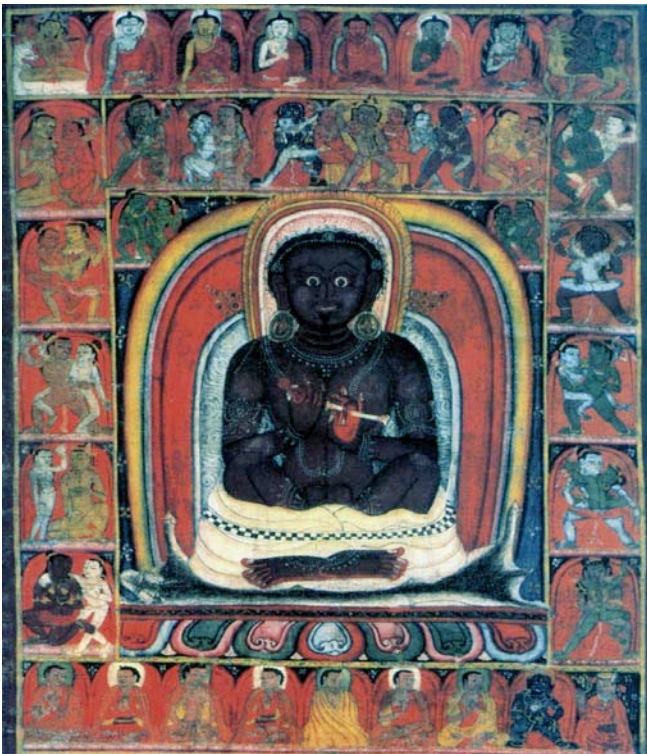


Fig. 2.5
Padma Sangye

Tibet, 14th century
Rob Linrothe, ed., *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2006), fig. 10.9.



Fig. 2.6
Cakras of the Subtle Body,
 Detail, Cat. no. 3, *Thangka*
 Depicting a Standing Yogin
 Displaying the Cakras of the Subtle
 Body

Private Collection
 The John C. and Susan L.
 Huntington Photographic
 Archive of Buddhist and Asian
 Art, Ohio State University, Scan
 Number 0050582



Fig. 2.7
Cakrasamvara Manḍala

Nepal, 1490
 Los Angeles County Museum of
 Art
 Dina Bangdel and John C.
 Huntington, *The Circle of Bliss:*
Buddhist Meditational Art
 (Columbus: Columbus Museum
 of Art and Chicago: Serindia
 Publications, 2003), cat. no. 70.



Fig. 2.8
Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravarahī

Tibet, c. 15th century
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Dina Bangdel and John C. Huntington, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* (Columbus: Columbus Museum of Art and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003), cat. no. 71.



Fig. 2.9
Consecration Scene
Detail, Fig. 2.8, *Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravarahī*

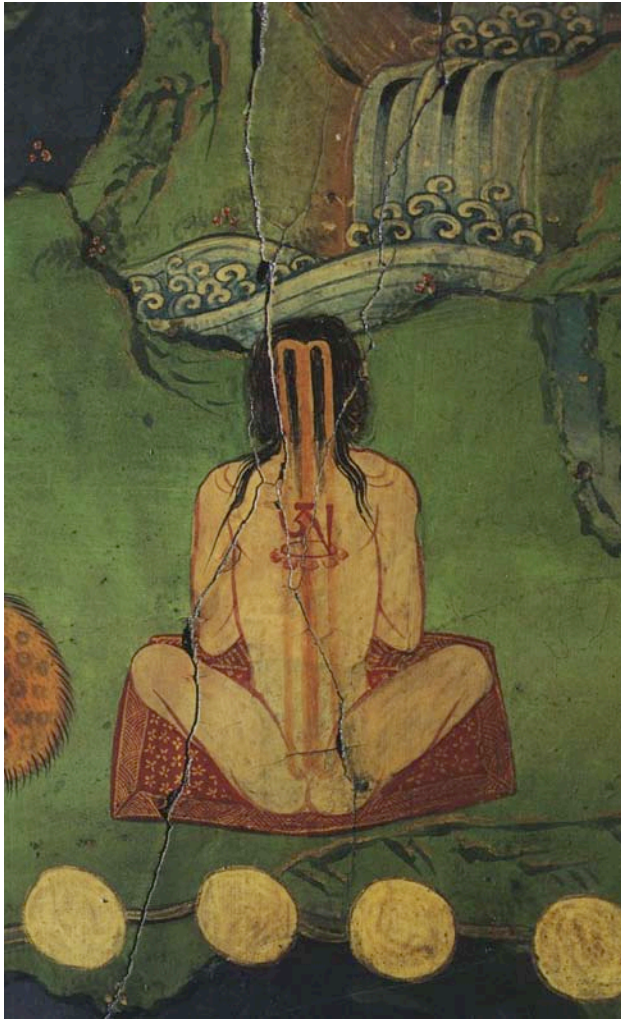


Fig 3.1
*Yogin Manipulating the Subtle
Body*

Third Floor, North Wall
Lukhang Temple
Tibet; c. 17th Century
Ian A. Baker, *The Dalai Lama's
Secret Temple: Tantric Wall
Paintings from Tibet* (New York:
Thames and Hudson, 2000), 96.

APPENDIX B:

CATALOGUE

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Cat. no. I

I. *Thangka Depicting a Standing Yogin Displaying the Cakras of the Subtle Body*

Central Tibet, c. 19th century

Mineral pigments and gold on cotton cloth, silk borders

H: 175.3 cm x W: 104.1 cm

Current Location: Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Gift of Dr. Mark and Dorothy Stern (M.91.118)

Publication: Dina Bangdel and John C. Huntington, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* (Columbus: Columbus Museum of Art and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003), cat. no. 63.

This painting depicts a centrally-placed, standing male yogin with five *cakras* superimposed on his body in a vertical line, suggestive of a spinal column. The yogin stands on a lotus blossom and is surrounded by numerous divine and semi-divine figures including *siddhas*, deities, monks, and various other Tantric practitioners. Above the yogin's head is a single *cakra*, represented as a rainbow of light that encircles a pair of deities embracing in sexual union. According to Dina Bangdel and John Huntington, this image is stylistically linked to the Menri Sarma school of central Tibet, but was perhaps commissioned by Newars living in the region, as a few elements suggest familiarity with Newar conventions, such as the manner of the representation of divine couples within the *cakras* and the inclusion of the goddess Hāritī.

The row of figures below the standing yogin are representations of guardian deities, the four *Lokapālas* or Heavenly Kings, Virūpākṣa, Vaiśravaṇa, Virūḍhaka, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. In the row above them, divided by the yogin's lotus pedestal, are four *mahāsiddhas*, each identifiable as such by their matted locks, skull ornaments, animal skins, and yogic straps and postures. Although Bangdel and Huntington identify them as Kuchipa, Rāhula, Campaka, and Kapālapa, they offer no justification for these attributions. The identification of the figure on the far right seems likely as Kapālapa,

“The Skull-Cup-Bearer,” as he is holding a skull-bowl, or *kapāla*. The identification of the figure to his left as Campaka is not unlikely, but neither is it particularly well-founded. The *mahāsiddha* on the far left who is seated with knees bound by a yogic strap and arms crossed in front of his torso most resembles contemporary representations of Caurāṅgipa (rather than Kucipa) or his teacher, Acīnta. The dark figure to his left may indeed be Rāhula, as there is a very similar, inscribed portrait of him painted on the Southern wall of the fifteenth-century Lamdre Chapel in the Palkhor Tsuglagkhang at Gyantse in the Tsang province of Southern Tibet. In this wall painting, Rāhula is dark in color and similarly relaxed in a posture of “royal ease” with his left knee bound by a yogic strap. It should be noted, however, that the representation of many *siddhas* is variable and inconsistent, and conclusive identifications are elusive in the absence of inscriptions or characteristic iconographic attributes.

Immediately above the *mahāsiddhas*, but similarly bisected by the yogin’s lower body, there is a bilaterally symmetrical architectural element, probably a monastic complex. Within the structure, on either side, there is an enshrined image of a buddha. On the left, he displays *bhumisparśa mudrā*, and on the right, *dhyāna mudrā*. Also on either side, there is an image of a dark figure in the clouds. This figure is unidentifiable at present, but perhaps could be the Indian guru Dampa Sangye, whose image has been identified in a curiously similar composition [Cat. no. 3]. Diagonally above the monastery on either side of the yogin’s shins, there is a vignette of a Tantric practitioner and another image of a buddha in the clouds. The latter may represent a visualization of the practitioner. Above these identical scenes, on either side of the yogin’s knees, there is a second pair of mirrored vignettes. Each scene includes a

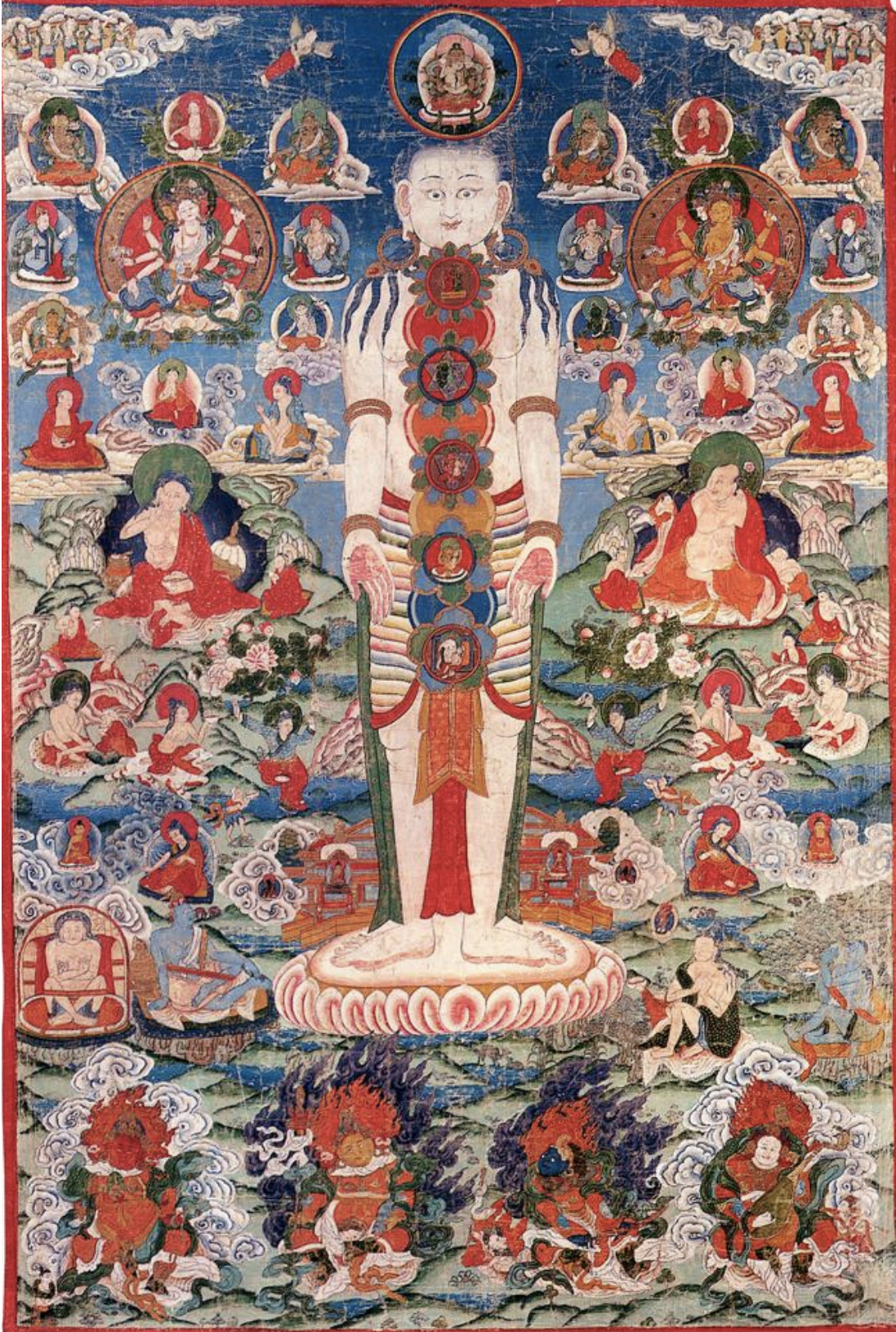
dancing figure in orange robes, a *ḍākiṇī* carrying a skull-bowl and a flaying knife and riding a snow lion, an image of *Mahāsiddha* Luipa consuming fish entrails, and three unidentifiable subsidiary Tantric practitioners. Above them, to the left of the yogin's torso, there is an image of the Tibetan yogi Milarepa. Milarepa is depicted seated in a cave with various tantric ritual tools. Among these is a curious vessel which may be suggestive of the Vase Consecration (*kalaśābhiṣeka*), the first consecration experienced by a new initiate. Across from Milarepa, to the right of the yogin's torso, there is an image that bears a strong resemblance to what has been identified as the *arhat* Hva-Shang [Cat. no. 3]. Both Milarepa and Hva-Shang appear to have an entourage consisting of an identical pair of attendants below them, and, above them, an image of a buddha with a lama and a *siddha* on either side of him.

Directly above Milarepa and Hva-Shang are two goddesses and their retinues. To the left of the yogin's head is a representation of a six-armed, yellow Vasundharā. She carries a text in her upper left hand, flowers in her middle left hand, and a gem in her lower left hand resting in her lap. She has a *māla* and peacock feathers in her upper right hands, and her lower right hand is extended in *varada mudrā*, the gesture of bestowing boons. Above her is an image of a monk, and on either side of her, there are three unidentifiable *siddha*-type figures. To the right of the yogin's head is a white Hāritī, identifiable from the child she holds in her lap with her lower left hand. Her other attributes are identical to Vasundarā's except that, rather than peacock feathers, her middle right hand holds a mirror. According to Bangdel and Huntington, in Nepal, Hāritī is considered an exoteric emanation of Vajrayoginī, an aspect which links this image both to esoteric practice (the cult of Vajrayoginī) and Newar patronage. Above

the goddesses, in each corner of the painting, there is a choir of five figures in the clouds, and the crowning *cakra* is framed by two winged, garland-bearing figures.

The yogin is dressed in a rainbow-colored and richly brocaded Indian *dhotī*, and adorned with bracelets, armbands, and earrings. The five *cakras* within his body are connected by four circles: from bottom to top, they are orange, red, yellow, and black. The lowest *cakra* has five petals. On its yellow pericarp there is a green rectangle, likely symbolic of the earth element, which is frequently represented as a square. Seated in front of it are the white, four-armed deity Gaṇeśa and his consort, who is seated on his left thigh. According to Bangdel and Huntington, this arrangement is a Newar convention for suggesting sexual union, as distinct from the Tibetan mode, which invariably depicts pairs of deities embracing front to front. Gaṇeśa's lower right hand displays *varada mudrā*. The second *cakra* has six petals and pair of yellow deities on its blue pericarp. They are seated in the Newar manner on a white circle, symbolic of the water element. The male is seated in yogic posture with the soles of his feet touching. He has four arms, the lower two of which combine *abhaya* and *varada mudrās* into *pratyudyana mudrā*, a gesture which Bangdel and Huntington describe as one of "welcoming (to a paradise world)." The third *cakra* has ten petals and a pair of red deities seated on a red, down-turned triangle on its yellow pericarp. The red triangle is symbolic of the fire element as well as of the Vajrayoginī cult. The fourth *cakra* has twelve petals and two interlocking green triangles on its red pericarp. Rather than sitting on his lap, the female is seated on her knees in front of the ithyphallic male. The fifth *cakra* has sixteen petals and a red pericarp with a single deity seated on a dais or lotus throne. The left side of the deity is green and male; the right side is red and

female. According to Bangdel and Huntington, this bisected mode of representation is common only to Śiva Ardhanariśvara, a Hindu deity, and the *ḍākiṇīs* of the *Cakrasaṃvara* tradition, a fact which leads them to associate the painting with the latter, as it is clearly Buddhist. The white pair of deities in the sixth *cakra* is seated in sexual embrace on top of an elaborate lotus throne. The male is four-armed; his upper two arms hold skull-bowls and his lower two are arranged in *dharmacakra mudrā*, the gesture of teaching. The female holds a skull-bowl in her left hand and what appears to be a flaying knife in her right. Together, these two represent completion stage practice, the realized goal of the standing yogin and the intended audience of the painting as a whole.



Cat. no. II

II. *Thangka Depicting a Standing Yogin Displaying the Cakras of the Subtle Body*

Nepal, c. 1900

Mineral pigment on cloth

H: 132 cm x W: 88 cm

Current Location: Private Collection

Publication: published online in The John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art, Ohio State University, Scan Number: 0050581, <http://huntington.wmc.ohio-state.edu/public/index.cfm?fuseaction=showThisDetail&ObjectID=15000343>

This painting depicts a centrally-placed, standing male yogin with five *cakras* superimposed on his body in a vertical line, suggestive of a spinal column. The yogin stands on a lotus blossom and is surrounded by numerous divine and semi-divine figures including *siddhas*, deities, monks, and various other tantric practitioners. Above the yogin's head is a single *cakra*, represented as a rainbow of light that encircles a pair of deities embracing in sexual union. According to John and Susan Huntington, this image is Nepalese, of the Shah style. The Huntingtons also claim the image represents the subtle body according to the Kagyu tradition, presumably because of the presence of the yogi Milarepa, one of its founders.

The row of figures below the standing yogin are representations of guardian deities, the four *Lokapālas* or Heavenly Kings, Virūpākṣa, Vaiśravaṇa, Virūḍhaka, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. In the row above them, divided by the yogin's lotus pedestal, are four *mahāsiddhas*, each identifiable as such by their matted locks, skull ornaments, animal skins, and yogic straps and postures. The *mahāsiddha* on the far left who is seated with knees bound by a yogic strap and arms crossed in front of his torso most resembles contemporary representations of Cauraṅgipa or his teacher, Aciṅta. The dark figure to his left may be identified as Rāhula on the basis of the comparative, inscribed portrait

of him painted on the Southern wall of the fifteenth-century Lamdre Chapel in the Palkhor Tsuglagkhang at Gyangtse in the Tsang province of Southern Tibet. In this wall painting, Rāhula is dark in color and similarly relaxed in a posture of “royal ease” with his left knee bound by a yogic strap. In this *thangka* Rāhula is leaning against a curious vessel suggestive of the Vase Consecration (*kalaśābhiṣeka*), which is the first consecration experienced by a new initiate. The *mahāsiddha* on the far right is Kapālapa, “The Skull-Cup-Bearer,” as he is holding a skull-bowl, or *kapāla*. The identification of the green-robed *mahāsiddha* to the left of Kapālapa is unknown, but an identical figure has been identified as Campaka [Cat. no. 1]. Diagonally above his head to the left, there is a small image of a standing, red deity enclosed in a rainbow of light. This may be a representation of Vajrayoginī, as well as a visualization of the *mahāsiddha*’s.

Immediately above the *mahāsiddhas*, but similarly bisected by the yogin’s lower body, there is a bilaterally symmetrical architectural element, a monastic complex. Within the structure, on either side, there is an enshrined image of a buddha. Also on either side, there is an image of a dark figure in the clouds. This figure is unidentifiable at present, but perhaps could be the Indian guru Dampa Sangye, whose image has been identified in a curiously similar composition [Cat. no. 3]. On either side of the monastery, there is a vignette of a Tantric practitioner and another image of a buddha in the clouds. The latter may represent a visualization of the practitioner. Above these identical scenes, on either side of the yogin’s knees, there is another pair of mirrored vignettes. Each scene includes a dancing figure in blue and red robes, a *ḍākiṇī* carrying a skull-bowl and a flaying knife and riding a snow lion, an image of *Mahāsiddha* Luipa

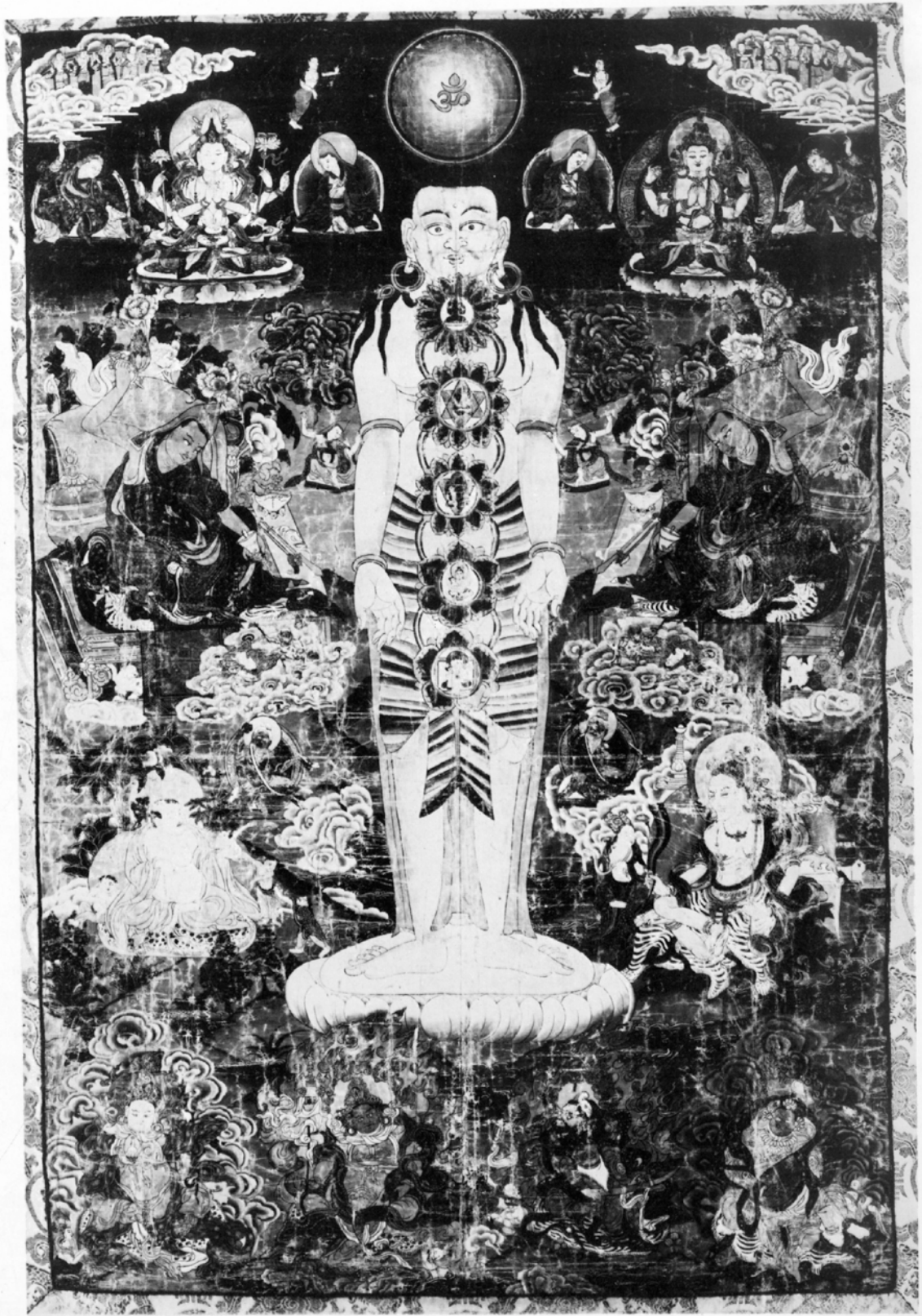
consuming fish entrails, and three unidentifiable tantric practitioners.

Above this scene on the left, there is an image of the beloved yogi Milarepa. He is depicted sitting in a cave with ritual implements on either side, including a vase highly similar to the one in the image of *Mahāsiddha* Rāhula, below. Across from Milarepa to the right of the yogin is an image of the corpulent *arhat* Hva-Shang, who is depicted holding a *māla* and a small child. Both Hva-Shang and Milarepa appear to have an entourage consisting of an identical pair of attendants below them, and, above them, an image of a buddha with a lama and a *siddha* on either side of him.

Directly above Milarepa and Hva-Shang are two goddesses and their retinues. To the left of the yogin's head is a six-armed, white Vasundharā. She carries a text in her upper left hand, flowers in her middle left hand, and a gem in her lower left hand resting in her lap. She has a *māla* and peacock feathers in her upper right hands, and her lower right hand is extended in *varada mudrā*, the gesture of bestowing boons. She is surrounded by seven *siddha*-type tantric practitioners. To the right of the yogin's head is a yellow Hāritī, identifiable from the child she holds in her lap with her lower left hand. Her other attributes are identical to Vasundarā's. Above the goddesses, in each corner of the painting, there is a choir of five figures in a rainbow in the clouds, and the crowning *cakra* is framed by two winged, garland-bearing figures.

The yogin is dressed in a multi-colored, richly brocaded Indian *dhotī*, and adorned with bracelets, armbands, and earrings. The five *cakras* within his body are connected by four circles: from bottom to top, they are blue, yellow, orange, and red. The lowest *cakra* has five petals and a red pericarp. Within it is an orange square outlined in blue. This is unusual, as the basal *cakra* is typically represented as a yellow

square, symbolic of the earth element. The deity Gaṇeśa and his consort are seated on the square. They are arranged in the Newar manner, in which sexual union is suggested by the consort seated on Gaṇeśa's thigh, as opposed to the more explicit Tibetan convention of figures embracing front to front. The second *cakra* has six petals and a red pericarp. Within it, a four-armed, yellow, male deity and his white consort are seated in the Newar manner on a white lotus throne. The third *cakra* has ten petals and a burgundy pericarp. Within it, a four-armed, red, male deity and his white consort are seated in the Newar manner on a purple, down-turned triangle. The fourth *cakra* has twelve petals and a red pericarp. Within it, a pair of green deities is seated on two interlocking purple triangles. Unlike in the lower *cakras*, the female appears to be kneeling beside the male. The fifth *cakra* has sixteen petals and a burgundy pericarp. Within it, a single deity is seated on a simple yellow dais. The figure is bisected; the left side is red, the right side is green. It is most likely the case that one half is male and the other female. The sixth and final *cakra* is outlined in a rainbow of light above the yogin's head. Within it, a pair of deities embraces in sexual union in the Tibetan manner. They are seated on a lotus throne and surrounded by clouds, garlands, and flowing robes. The male appears to display *dhyāna mudrā*, while the female holds a skull-bowl and a flaying knife.



Cat. no. III

III. *Thangka Depicting a Standing Yogin Displaying the Cakras of the Subtle Body*

Nepal or Tibet, c. 1900 (?)

Painting on cloth, silk borders

Dimensions unknown

Current Location: John Gilmore Ford Collection

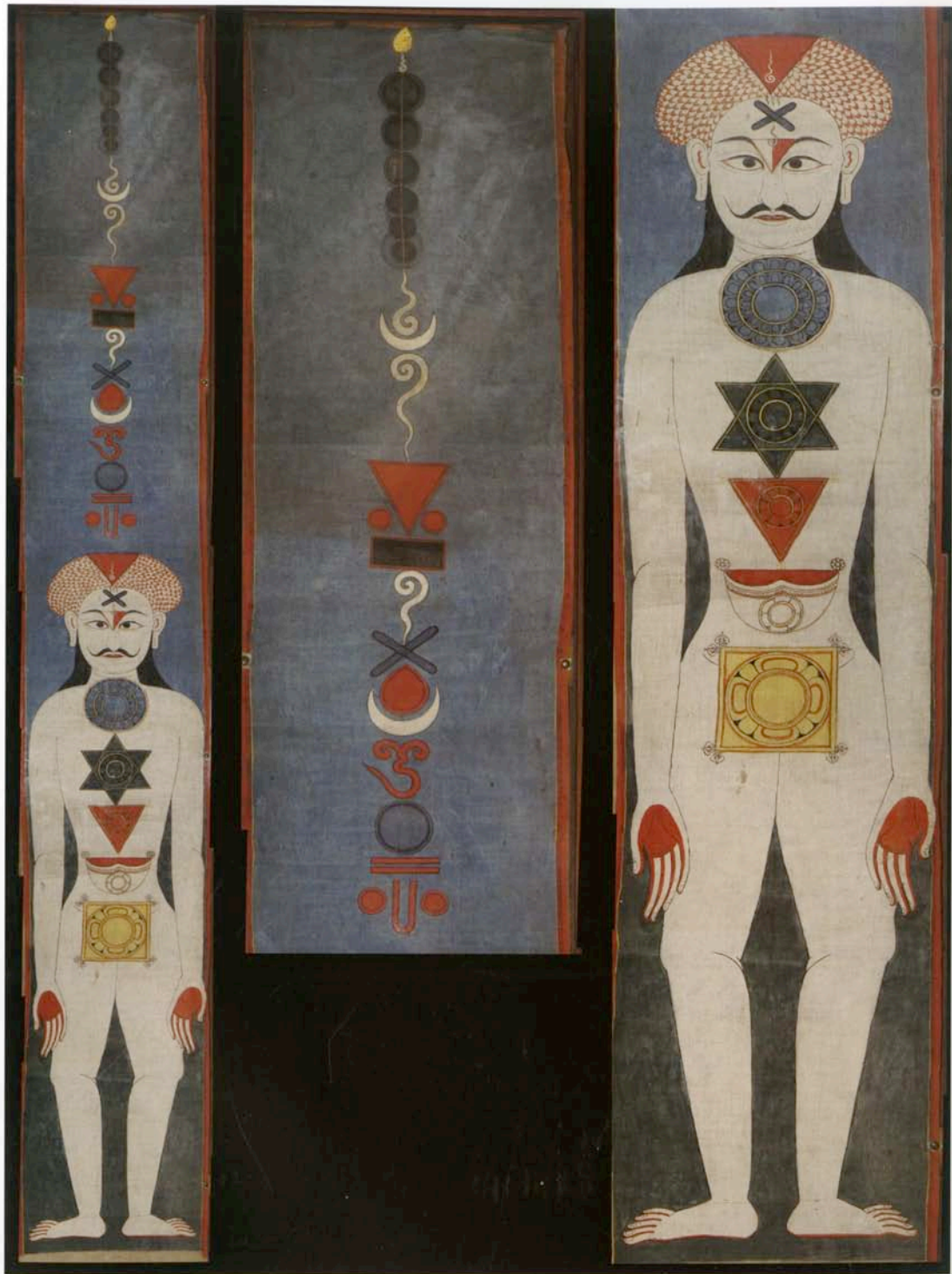
Publication: Detlef-Ingo Lauf, *Verborgene Botschaft tibetischer Thangkas: Bildmeditation und Deutung lamaistischer Kultbilder* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Aurum Verlag, 1976), plate 60.

This painting depicts a centrally-placed male yogin standing on a lotus blossom. The yogin has five *cakras* superimposed on his body in a vertical line, suggestive of a spinal column. Above his head is another *cakra*, an orb with a rainbow border that encloses the sacred syllable *om*, a significant difference from similar images (such as Cat. nos. 1 and 3). The yogin's retinue includes numerous divine and semi-divine figures, such as *siddhas*, deities, and monks. Below him are representations of guardian deities, the four *Lokapālas* or Heavenly Kings, Virūpākṣa, Vaiśravaṇa, Virūḍhaka, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Above them and to the left of the yogin's lower legs is a figure that has been identified by Detlef-Ingo Lauf as the *arhat* Hva-Shang. Characteristically, Hva-Shang's iconography includes a corpulent figure, a *māla*, and a lemon or persimmon as attributes, as well as a group of children. This figure appears to be holding, not a lemon, but a tiny figure, perhaps a child. Across from Hva-Shang is an Indian *mahāsiddha* seated on a tiger skin and holding a rainbow of light. Above the rainbow is a small *stūpa*. Diagonally above these two figures, in the clouds on either side of the yogin's knees, there is an image of a dark figure whom Lauf has identified as the Indian guru Dampa Sangye, the teacher of the Zhi-byed-pa sect. Above his portraits, on either side of the yogin's midsection, there are two mirror images of a Tibetan monk engaged in Tantric ritual. These figures are shown enthroned beside a table bearing ritual implements. The

monks hold a *vajra* and a bell, or *ghaṇṭa*. On the tables are a skull bowl, a flaying knife, and possibly a manuscript. Above the monk, to the left of the yogin's head, is the twelve-armed deity Nāmasamgīti Mañjuśrī, recognizable by the book-bearing lotus in one of his left hands. He is flanked by a *siddha* and a monk. Mirroring this group on the right hand side of the composition, there is an image of a four-armed Avalokiteśvara, also flanked by a monk and a *siddha*. Above the two deities in each upper corner of the painting there is a choir of five figures. Both stand against a rainbow in a group of clouds. The crowning *cakra* is framed by garland-bearing figures.

The yogin is dressed in a multicolored *dhotī* and adorned with bracelets, armbands, and earrings, as in Cat. nos. 1 and 2. The five *cakras* within his body are connected by four light-colored circles. Lauf suggests that the two primary *nāḍī* as well as the *avadhūtī* are also visible, but he may have mistaken the rainbow borders of these connecting circles for the *nāḍī*. The lowest *cakra* has five petals, one of which is light-colored. On its pericarp there is a square on which the deity Gaṇeśa and a consort are seated. The couple is composed in the Newar manner, in which sexual union is suggested by the consort sitting on Gaṇeśa's thigh. This is distinct from the Tibetan manner, in which they would embrace front to front. The second *cakra* has six petals and pair of light-colored deities on its pericarp. Although it is difficult to see definitively in this reproduction, this pair is likely seated on a white lotus as in many of the second *cakra's* *yantra* forms. The third *cakra* has ten petals. A dark colored deity and his lighter-colored consort sit on the down-turned triangle on its pericarp. The fourth *cakra* has twelve petals and two interlocking triangles on its pericarp. This divine pair is arranged in a different manner than the lower three. It appears that, in this image, a

light-colored male embraces a dark-colored female in the Tibetan manner. The fifth *cakra* has sixteen petals and a single deity sitting on a simple dais within its pericarp. Although it is difficult to see in this reproduction, this figure is most likely half male and half female. According to Lauf, the *bindu* on the yogin's forehead may represent a sixth *cakra*, in which case the encircled *om* would be the seventh.



Cat. no. IV

IV. *Subtle Body Diagram*

Nepal, c. 1850

Opaque watercolor on cotton cloth

H: 213.4 cm

Current Location: Bhaktapur National Museum

Publication: Dina Bangdel and John C. Huntington, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* (Columbus: Columbus Museum of Art and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003), cat. no. 64.

This painting depicts a standing male yogin with *cakras* superimposed on his body in a vertical line. Above the figure's head, the *cakras*, represented in *yantra* form, continue in a column. Dina Bangdel and John Huntington attribute the painting to the "Rajput-derived style" of nineteenth-century Nepal, due to the distinctive facial features and moustache.

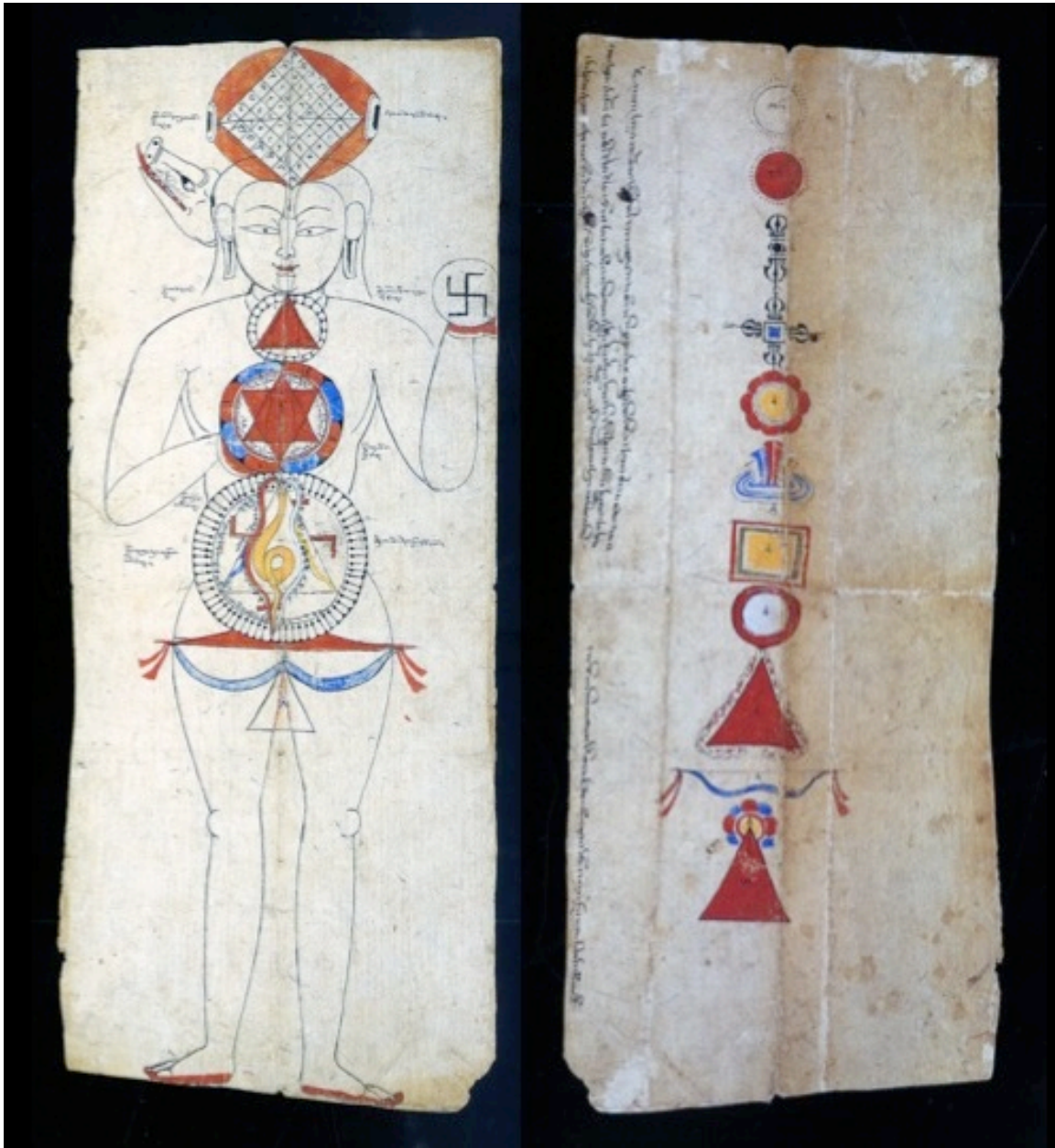
The first *cakra*, located just below the yogin's pelvis, is depicted as a yellow square with two half-*vajras* extending from each of its four corners. Within the square is a four-petaled lotus. The second *cakra* is represented by a white semi-circle. Bangdel and Huntington suggest the form is an abstract rendering of a skull-bowl, in which the horizontal red shape represents the bowl's being filled with blood. On the side of the bowl there is a six-petaled lotus. At each of its two corners, there is a white, eight-petaled lotus. The third *cakra* is represented by a down-turned red triangle. Within it is a ten-petaled lotus. The fourth *cakra* is represented as a pair of interlocking green triangles. Within them is a twelve-petaled lotus. The fifth *cakra* is a blue circle within which are two concentric, sixteen-petaled lotuses.

The remaining *cakras* are less distinguishable from one another. It is likely that the down-turned red triangle on top of the yogin's head and the red-tipped petals that

fan away from it represent the thousand-petaled lotus *cakra* at the crown of the head. Bangdel and Huntington also suggest that the triangle associates the image with Vajravarahī. Upon it, there is a white spiral *bindu*. Between the yogin's eyes, the area often referred to as the "third eye," there is a down-turned triangle that is half-white, half-red. Partially superimposed upon it is a white spiral *bindu*. Above this, on the yogin's forehead, there is a blue-black "X" shape. Above this, protruding from beneath what could be called the yogin's hairline, there are three small tail-like shapes. The one on the far left is red, and the other two are white. These may represent the three primary *nāḍī*, the *rasanā*, the *lalanā* (the right and left channels, respectively), and the *avadhūtī* (the central channel).

Immediately above the yogin's head, there is a group of red symbols: a "U" shape with two circles on either side, and two horizontal bars above it. Above this, there is a blue-black circle. Above the circle is a curious red shape reminiscent of the syllable "om," especially when considered along with the white crescent and red drop above it, which could represent the horizontal bar and *anusvāra* of the *devanāgarī* script (a similar configuration appears in the highest *cakra* in Cat. no. 3). Next, there is another blue-black "X" and a white spiral *bindu*. Above this, there is a horizontally-oriented black rectangle outlined in red, followed by a down-turned red triangle with a red circle on either side. Next, there is a white spiral *bindu*, a white crescent, and another white spiral *bindu*. Above this is a series of six blue-black circles overlaid with a golden, thread-like line. These circles increase in size, slightly, from bottom to top. They are superimposed upon a second set of six blue circles. The second, background set is quite faint and, in contrast, its circles decrease in size from bottom to top. Above

the topmost circle is another white spiral *bindu*. Finally, the image is crowned with a golden teardrop.



Cat. no. V

V. *Subtle Body Diagram*

Guge, Western Tibet, 11th century

Painting on paper

H: 80 cm x W: 30 cm

Current Location: Pritzker Collection

Publication: Geoffrey Samuel, "Body and Mind in Tibetan Medicine and Tantric Buddhism," in *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine*, edited by Theresia Hofer, exhibition catalogue (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2014), fig. no. 2.4. Amy Heller, "Two Early Tibetan Ritual Diagrams for Cakra Meditations," *Tibet Journal* v. 34/35 no. 3-4/1-2, (2009): 59-70. Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Kashmir* (New York and Milano: Asia Society and 5 Continents Editions, 2007), exhibition catalogue, fig. 116.

These two images are painted on either side of a single piece of paper. Radio-carbon analysis has secured the date of its production to the eleventh-century. On the recto is a human figure of ambiguous gender with six *cakras* superimposed on his or her body. The left hand holds a mirror emblazoned with a swastika. The boar's head emerging from the head of the figure may associate the image with Vajravaraha or Vajravarahī. On the verso there are eleven *cakras* or symbols arranged in a vertical column. In part, these correspond to symbolic descriptions of the cosmos and its elemental constituents as expressed in both Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, a fourth- or fifth-century treatise, as well as in the *Kālacakra Tantra*, composed around the same time as the paintings themselves. According to Pratapaditya Pal and Amy Heller, the facial features and proportions of the figure on the recto indicate that the paintings are stylistically related to early schools of Kashmiri artists working in Western Tibet. The two inscriptions on the verso suggest that the image was commissioned by a monk named Zhi ba 'od. Heller assumes this individual to be Pho brag Zhi ba 'od, the prince of Guge (1016-1111) who was ordained as a royal monk at age 46. Thus she concludes that

these paintings are evidence of the previously undocumented transmission of esoteric Indian cultic ideas within the royal family of Guge, although this remains highly speculative.

The inscriptions on the recto side refer to ritual practices associated with specific *cakras*, as well as identify their respective seed-syllables. The lowest *cakra* is a white triangle marked with the syllable ‘e’. The second *cakra* is a horizontal blue bow shape with red flags fluttering from either end and marked with the syllable ‘yam.’ An elongated red triangle above the bow string is partially obscured by the third *cakra*. The imagery of the third *cakra* is particularly complex. Within the pericarp of a white, sixty-four-petaled lotus there is a red swastika obscured by a white triangle. Superimposed on the triangle, there is a spiraled, yellow serpent evocative of the Hindu goddess *Kuṇḍalinī*. The serpent’s mouth appears to be clamped over two ribbon-like shapes, one red and one white, meant to represent the right and left channels of the subtle body. Alongside these channels are two other ribbon-like vertical shapes, one blue and one yellow, which continue as black lines up through the yogin’s nostrils and into the *cakra* at the crown of the head. Similarly, a faint black line runs the length of the figure’s midline from the top of the third *cakra* through a tiny *bindu* on the yogin’s forehead and up to the crown. The inscription on the periphery of the lotus pericarp reads, “*Om Om Om Sarva Buddha dakini Ye Bazdraā pani bee ro tsa ni ye hum hum phat phat phat sva ha,*” and is apparently a *mantra* invoking Vajrayoginī, Vajrapaṇi and Vairocana. Two other inscriptions refer to this *cakra* as the “cakra of the whirling turquoise” (*phyi g.yu ru ‘khyil pa ‘i ca kra*), and the “circle of the wisdom belly/navel” (*lte/lto ba ye shes kyi ‘khor lo*).

The figure's right arm is bent so as to appear to be holding the fourth *cakra* at the heart, which is represented as an eight-petaled lotus with alternating blue and red petals. On its white pericarp there are two interlocking red triangles labeled with the syllable 'hri.' Two inscriptions identify this *cakra* as the "cakra of the exoteric *gtor ma* offering" (*phyi gtor ma 'i ca kra*) and the "cakra of the Dharma, the heart" (*snying ga chos kyi ca kra*). The fifth *cakra* is represented as a white, twenty-four-petaled lotus with a red triangle on its pericarp. Its inscription labels it as the "cakra of the exoteric offering" (*phyi 'mcod pa 'i ca kra*). The white circle marked with a swastika in the yogin's left hand is labeled as the "cakra of the arm, mirror-like wisdom" (*me long yees/ye shes dpung gi ca kra*). The highest *cakra* is represented as a red circle upon which there is a grid of forty-nine syllables. On each of its right and left sides there are three concentric circles rendered in profile. The outer two of these are white and the center is black. This imagery is highly unusual and its exact significance is yet unknown. Two inscriptions identify this *cakra* as "the cakra of great joy," and "the cakra of the assembly of letters of the exoteric ritual" (*bde' ba chen po 'i ca kra; phyi yi gi btu' ba 'i ca kra*).

The verso side consists of eleven symbols representing a sort of cosmic diagram, as well as two inscriptions that allude, however indirectly, to the patron and potential ritual use of the paintings. The lowest few symbols resemble the bottom three *cakras* on the recto. The lowest of these is a red triangle labeled with the syllable 'e.' Its apex pierces an eight-petaled lotus with a yellow pericarp and alternating blue and red petals. It is labeled with the syllable 'bam.' Above the lotus is another blue bow shape tipped with red flags and labeled with the syllable 'yam.' Next is another red triangle

which is outlined with flames and marked with the syllable ‘*raṃ.*’ Above it are two concentric circles, red on the outside and white on the inside, labeled ‘*bam.*’ Above the circle are four successive squares. From the outermost square they are red, white, green, and yellow, and labeled with the syllable ‘*laṃ.*’ Next is a symbolic representation of Mt. Sumeru (‘*suṃ.*’) in which there are three concentric circles enclosing five “staves” that may represent the five elements: earth, fire, water, wind, and space. Above this is an eight-petaled lotus with red petals and a yellow pericarp, labeled ‘*bam.*’ Next is a black *viśva-vajra* enclosing a blue square labeled ‘*huṃ.*’ Above it is a vertical black *vajra* labeled ‘*bam.*’ The penultimate symbol is a red sun disc labeled ‘*ka li,*’ and the topmost symbol is a white moon disc labeled ‘*a li.*’

The inscriptions on the verso identify Zhi ba ‘od and shed some light on the paintings’ intended use. The inscription on the left alludes to “body clues/signs painted (to indicate) the basis of the mirror divination practice, made/written by the aged royal monk” (*rgya/rgyal slong dgan pas pro mo spyad pa ‘i bleng bzhis brgyud ‘pa’ lus rgyus*). The more lengthy inscription on the right is from the perspective of Zhi ba ‘od speaking to his son:

Concerning the basis of the painted (diagram), understand that it is the essential points of the body. You Shud bu Ser skya ma, son of Shud pu Zhi ba ‘od, because I am close to dying, look (at this diagram)! Having spend my life (as) Shud bu Zhi ba ‘od, (now) I also die. I studied all the sutra and piṭaka in front of the (teacher who is like) Buddha Kāśyapa, in all of India east and west there is none more knowledgeable than me in mirror divination and logic;” (*lus gnas yin ‘gos rgyus pa ‘i ‘bye zhi ni shud pu zhi ba ‘od gi bu shud p user skya ma de de bzhin 2 bshegs pa ‘od srungs gi drung du mdo sde sde snod ma lus slabs nas rgya kar shar nub na pra dang tshad ma 3*

*nga bas 'khas na med/ shud bu zhi ba 'od tshe 'i dus byas 'chi yang bu khyod
'gra' ('grab") yod pas lta).*

These inscriptions work together with those describing the *cakras* to characterize Zhi ba 'od as an advanced ritual specialist. He declares his proficiency in mirror divination (*pro mo*), and several types of exoteric ritual which may also be connected with mirror divination are enumerated on the verso, including *mchod* and *gtor ma* offering. These paintings likely represent the aged monk conferring his esoteric knowledge of the subtle body and related ritual practice to his son before his death.