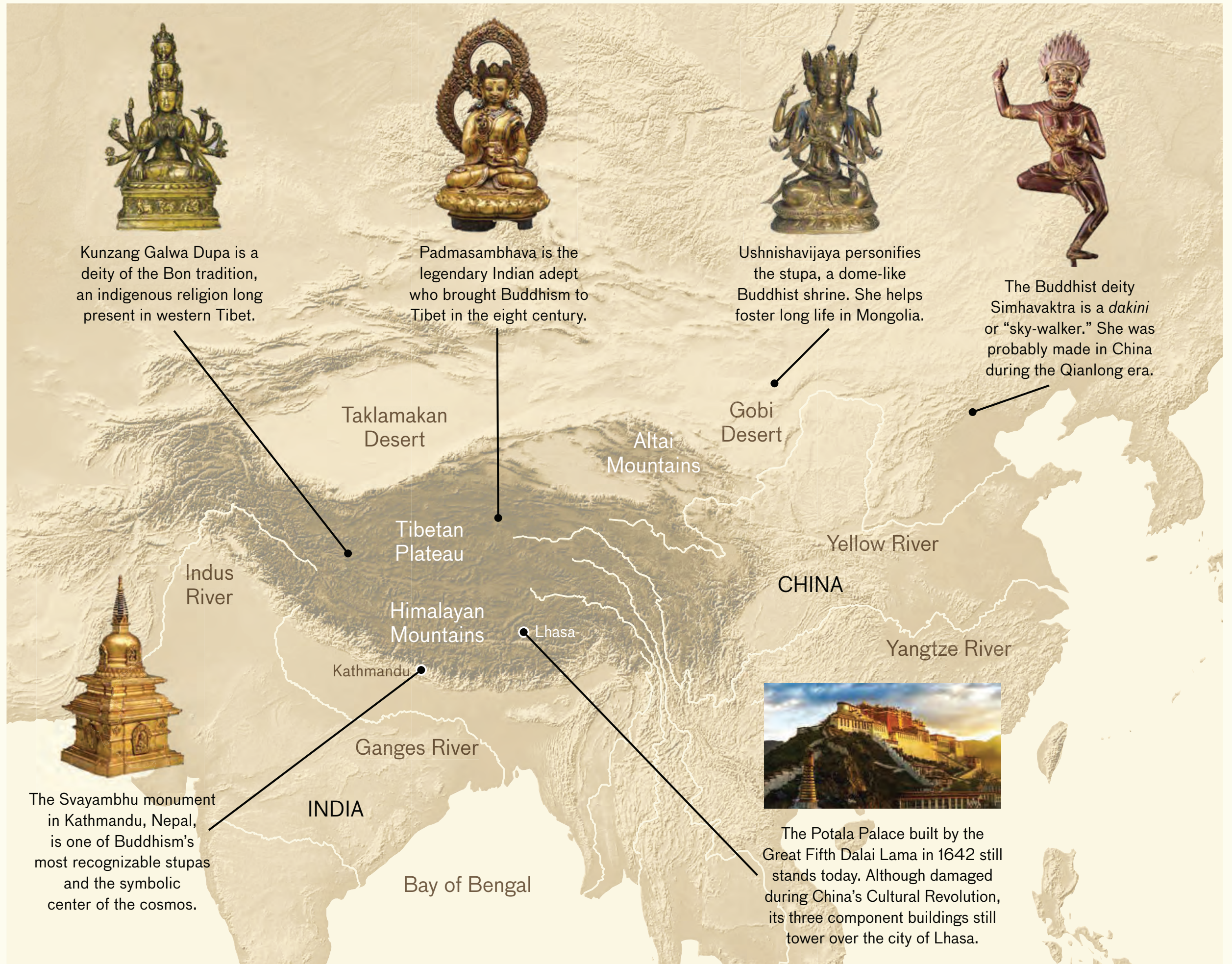


Sacred Art of the Himalayan Region

Art is absolutely central to Himalayan spirituality. Sculptures and paintings of sacred figures serve as models for the most important Tibetan meditative practice, which involves visualization. Because they are understood as containers of the body, speech, and mind of enlightened beings, properly created artworks can preserve and transmit sacred presences across time. Indeed, Tibetan sacred art is sometimes attributed with the power to “liberate on sight,” because even a visual encounter with its symbolism can raise awareness beyond ordinary thought, feeling, and perception.



Kunzang Galwa Dupa is a deity of the Bon tradition, an indigenous religion long present in western Tibet.



Padmasambhava is the legendary Indian adept who brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eight century.



Ushnishavijaya personifies the stupa, a dome-like Buddhist shrine. She helps foster long life in Mongolia.



The Buddhist deity Simhavaktra is a *dakini* or “sky-walker.” She was probably made in China during the Qianlong era.



The Svayambhu monument in Kathmandu, Nepal, is one of Buddhism’s most recognizable stupas and the symbolic center of the cosmos.



The Potala Palace built by the Great Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642 still stands today. Although damaged during China’s Cultural Revolution, its three component buildings still tower over the city of Lhasa.

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Ritual Implements of Bone

One element in the development of Tibetan Buddhism was the spiritual discipline of ascetics, who wandered the funeral grounds of ancient India practicing meditation. To this day, ritual implements made from human bone are a distinctive feature of Tibetan Buddhism.

To Buddhists, human bone is a reminder that life is brief and death inevitable. Bones have other symbolic dimensions as well. Tibetans see the skull as a natural container. Unshaped by human hands, it represents the fundamental goodness that is the natural condition of the mind. Bone trumpets call fearsome supernatural entities. Aprons of bone beads are counted among the funerary “dancing clothes” that signify a yogin’s heroic victory over life and death.

Bone implements are also portrayed in painting and sculpture. In this gallery the goddess Palden Lhamo holds a skull bowl, and Chakrasamvara and his consort as well as the adept Virupa wear bone aprons.



Bone apron (*sanmudras*)
1700–1800
Tibet
Human bone
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60M101



Sorcerer’s horn
1800–1900
Tibet
Goat horn and copper alloy
Gift of M. R. N. MacPherson, 1992.226

This horn terminates in the head of a mythical crocodile (*makara*) and is carved with auspicious and protective designs such as buddhas, a stupa, a dragon, a scorpion, and a snake. During exorcisms, beans or mustard seeds, kept inside the horn, are cast into the air.



Ewer made from human skulls
Approx. 1800–1911
China; Dolonnor, Inner Mongolia
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Human bone and copper repoussé
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60M454



The Buddhist deity Chitipati
Approx. 1800
Tibet
Bronze with gilding
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B62B170

Chitipati is the lord of funeral grounds and a god of knowledge. He is usually shown with a female consort.



Ritual dagger
Approx. 1500–1600
Tibet
Bronze and iron
Acquisition made possible by Donald Buhman, 2003.13

This kind of Tibetan ritual instrument for subjugating demons is known as a *phurba*. Padmasambhava was credited with its introduction when he brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century. This powerful instrument is unusual in having a combination of two metals: a bronze handle and a triangular iron blade. The three heads at the top of the dagger differ slightly from each other, but each has a third eye, frowning eyebrows, and fangs to accentuate the god’s wrathful appearance. A hole is pierced on top so that a tassel or scarf can be attached to it.

The handle is formed by a knob with lotus petals situated between two knots, below which is a ritual crocodile called a *makara*, from whose jaws issue the iron blade and two serpents. The triple blade symbolizes overcoming the three root poisons of desire, ignorance, and hatred.



Pair of thighbone trumpets (*kang-ling*)
Approx. 1800–1911
China; Dolonnor, Inner Mongolia
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Human bone and brass
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60B218 and B60B219

These trumpets act as a reminder to the player and to the listeners of their own impermanence and death.

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Tibetan Ritual Objects

Tibetans created many objects to be used in religious rituals and ceremonies. Monks hold the thunderbolt and bell in their hands during prayers, and such implements are seen in the hands of Buddhist deities. Held in the right and left hand respectively, they represent the wisdom and skillful means without which one cannot be enlightened. The soundings of long horns and conch-shell trumpets summon the monks to prayers every morning, and together with the sounds of cymbals and drums, they punctuate the prayer sessions. Prayer wheels, which come in all sizes, express Tibetan Buddhists' devotion to their religion. Stuffed with rolled-up prayers, prayer wheels are rotated clockwise, and a rotating prayer wheel ensures that, even when one is having a conversation with friends, prayers are being said. Skull bowls, trumpets, and vessels made of human bones remind devotees that life is impermanent, and they have to work hard for their salvation.



Conch shell
1700–1800
Tibet
Conch shell mounted on gilded silver with inlaid jewels
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60M3



Ritual bell and symbolic thunderbolt
China
Ming dynasty, reign of the Yongle emperor (1403–1424)
Bronze with gilding
Gift of Margaret Polak, B85B3.a and B85B3.b

The bell and thunderbolt (*dorje* and *drilbu*) are the foremost ritual implements of Tibetan Buddhism. The bell symbolizes emptiness, the ultimate reality of the cosmos, while the thunderbolt symbolizes the meditative, ritual, and philosophical methods used to attain it. Used together during prayers and rituals, they signify the union of emptiness and the method of its attainment, which together comprise the enlightened state. These objects are of great historical significance: the Yongle emperor of China had these implements cast as a gift for a high lama of Tibet.



Skull bowl (*kapala*)
1700–1800
Tibet
Silver with gilding
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60M7



Pair of butter lamps
Approx. 1700–1800
Tibet
Silver
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62M75.a and B62M75.b

Tibetans bring butter to temples and add it to the butter lamps burning there. This is done as a means of acquiring merit in Buddhist practice.

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Teapot

1700–1800

Tibet

Silver

The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OM16+



Prayer wheel

1700–1800

Tibet

Silver

The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OB158



Libation jug

1800–1900

Tibet

Silver repoussé

The Avery Brundage Collection, B6OM1



Storage box

1600–1800

Tibet

Wood, leather, metal, pigment, and wool
*Gift of Ruth Sutherlin Hayward and
Robert W. Hayward in recognition of the
anonymous artist who created Tibetan
furniture, 2005.86*

The leather covering of this wooden storage box is painted with an overall design of birds amid flowering and scrolling vines. The influence of imported textiles can be seen in the rectangular border design of interlocking coins. The front panel features a figure holding a tray of jewels. Red and gold, the main colors, are shown against a black background. The box is lined with a stenciled wool felt lining from Mongolia. It has metal mounts, metal lugs on the sides, and a latch that can be secured with a lock.



Treasure chest

Approx. 1600–1700

Tibet

Wood with painted and varnished cloth overlay, inlaid gold, inlaid silver, and iron fittings
Gift of the Connoisseurs' Council.
2001.3

Every monastery has a chest in which to lock its treasures, such as silver and gold butter lamps and rare *thangkas*. As befitting a treasure chest, this example has elegant inlaid fittings and is elaborately painted, bearing the image of a rare form of a wealth-deity; he has three heads and holds various objects, including two mongooses from which spill jewels. Also depicted on this chest are two Karmapa Lamas, the highest incarnation of the Kagyu order, indicating that this piece of furniture came from a temple of that order. The design of the bottom part of this chest gives us the illusion that it is in two sections, but actually there is only one space inside.

Such chests were made in pairs. The twin of this one is in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

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Shrine with fifteen gilded bronze images

Approx. 1600–1800

Central Tibet

Wood with colors and gilding

Gift of Donald Buhman and Louise Russell, 1995.72

This Tibetan shrine, with its fifteen carved niches, is for the display of sacred images. Such shrines are a common feature inside shrine rooms of temples and private residences in Tibet. The small triangular decorations on top are known as “piles of books,” a popular motif in the woodcarver’s repertoire. The production of Vajrayana shrines, as well as the commissioning of high-quality bronzes such as these, reveals how deeply the Vajrayana tradition had influenced Chinese religious thought and practice by the turn of the twentieth century.

All the images are from China’s Qing dynasty (1644–1911), were made between 1700 and 1900, and are bronze, gilded bronze, or partially gilded bronze. All are from the Avery Brundage Collection except 1995.2, which was a gift of an anonymous donor.



1
Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, B60B1059

This bodhisattva carries the book of Transcendent Wisdom and the sword that cleaves the clouds of ignorance.

2
Jina Padmajyotis, a buddha of confession, B60B148

One of the thirty-five buddhas of confession in Tibetan Buddhism, this buddha stands for the radiant purity of the lotus flower.

3
Jina Bhadrashri, a buddha of confession, B60B146

As one of the thirty-five buddhas of confession in Tibetan Buddhism, Bhadrashri stands for all-embracing kindness. His right hand is in the gesture of resignation, and his left hand in the gesture of meditation.

4
Jina Prabhasashri, a buddha of confession, B60B147

One of the thirty-five buddhas of confession in Tibetan Buddhism, this buddha stands for the holy light of forgiveness. His hands are held in the gesture of victorious argument.

5
The Buddhist lama Tsongkhapa, B60B145

As an incarnation of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, the famous abbot and scholar Tsong Khapa (1357–1419) also carries a sword and a book.

6
The Buddhist deity White Mahakala, B60B141.a-.b

The Third Dalai Lama introduced the

worship of this form of Mahakala to Mongolia in the 1500s. Mahakala steps on two elephant-headed Ganeshas. His missing symbolic implements are the flaming jewels, a skull bowl, and an elephant prod.

7
The Buddhist deity Nritya, B60B144

As the goddess of the dance, Nritya holds aloft two thunderbolts. The dark bronze surface forms a contrast with the gilded areas. This statue was part of a large group of images made for the Qing imperial palace.

8
The Buddha Amitayus, B60B140

The buddha of boundless life grants longevity. This statue was one of many commissioned for the mother of the Qianlong emperor on the occasion of her eightieth birthday. The thunderbolt legs of the throne and the ornaments of the figure show heavy Nepalese influence.

9
The Buddhist deity Vajrasphoti, B60B143

This image of the goddess Vajrasphoti, whose name can be translated as “diamond chain,” once actually carried chains. During the Qianlong period, a number of sculptures representing complete Buddhist pantheons were commissioned for the emperor’s private worship. This goddess once belonged to such a set.

10
The Buddhist guardian Six-Armed Mahakala, B60B156

Mahakala, who has many forms, is one of the Eight Guardians of the Law. An inscription in Chinese on the back states that it was commissioned by a

person named Pan on the first day of the ninth month, in the twentieth year of the Daoguang emperor (1840).

11
The Buddhist guardian Dam Chen riding an elephant, B60B151

The Dam Chen were five Mongol brothers who swore to protect Buddhism. Dwarfish in appearance, they sit sideways on their mounts. This figure carries a thunderbolt and a lasso.

12
The Buddhist guardian Dam Chen riding a mule, B60B152

One of the five Dam Chen brothers from Mongolia who took an oath to protect Buddhism, this brother brandishes a hammer.

13
Seated bodhisattva, 1995.25

The identity of this bodhisattva is not known. The collar of leaves that adorns him is rather unusual. His left hand is raised in the gesture of religious discussion, while his right hand is lowered in the gift-granting gesture.

14
The Buddhist guardian Dam Chen riding a goat, B60B150

As one of the five brothers from Mongolia who took an oath to protect Buddhism, Garba Nagpo carries the *vajra* (thunderbolt), hammer (which in this image is missing), and tiger-skin bellows.

15
The Buddhist guardian Dam Chen riding a horse, B62B176

The five Dam Chen brothers from Mongolia took an oath to protect Buddhism. They wear broad-brimmed hats and sit sideways on their mounts.

Simhavaktra's Symbolism

Simhavaktra, the “lion-headed one” is a “sky-walker” (*dakini*), a magical being who inhabits the realm of the sky. Her appearance symbolically expresses many aspects of Buddhist thought.

The Buddhist deity Simhavaktra, a *dakini*

China; Beijing or vicinity, Hebei province

Qing dynasty, reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736–1795)

Dry lacquer inlaid with semiprecious stones

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60S600



Her hair blazes upward with the fire of wisdom.

Her lion's head indicates fearlessness in confronting all obstacles to liberation.

Her cape of freshly flayed human skin signifies her transcendence of human limitations.

The bone ornaments on her chest indicate that she has passed beyond the cycles of birth and death.

The tiger skin around her waist symbolizes victory over all harmful emotions.



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Simhavaktra, the “Sky-Walker”

Simhavaktra is a *dakini*, a Sanskrit term that translates from the Tibetan as “sky-walker” (*mkha’ gro ma*). Originally derived from imagery and practices associated with female Indian yogis, the *dakini* in Tibet becomes a deity thought to reside in and dance through the sky. With her legs drawn up in a specific dancing posture, she symbolizes the movement (*gro*) of energy in space (*mkha’*), and by extension the union of appearance (*snang ba*) and emptiness (*stong ba*) whose realization brings enlightenment.

Meditating on Simhavaktra

Because Simhavaktra is understood to be a manifestation of enlightened awareness, she is also a deity visualized during meditation (*vidam*). By visualizing Simhavaktra, meditators incorporate her fierce compassion within their own awareness. Such meditative incorporation of Simhavaktra is believed to transmute the psychological poison of hatred into wisdom.

Simhavaktra and Padmasambhava

Simhavaktra is associated first and foremost with the Indian adept Padmasambhava, the man accredited with taming the native demons of Tibet and enabling the establishment of Buddhism in the Himalayan Region. According to some legends, Simhavaktra trained Padmasambhava during his time in the western Indian kingdom of Oddiyana. One of his eight forms, the “Lions’ Roar,” (Sanskrit: *simharaurava*), is the aspect he took while training under Simhavaktra. Sometimes she is even regarded as a secret form taken by Padmasambhava.

Simhavaktra and “Hidden Treasures”

Most practices focused on Simhavaktra derive not from any Tantric texts translated from Indian sources, but rather from texts developed only in Tibet called “hidden treasures” (*gter ma*, pronounced “terma”). Such treasures—of which the famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is an example—are texts that, according to tradition, Padmasambhava composed and hid in the eighth century so they might survive an impending crisis: the ninth-century proscription of Buddhism in Tibet. Padmasambhava intended that his treasures be recovered only by the right persons at the right time. Accordingly, he encoded these texts in the script of the *dakinis*, which can only be decoded with their aid.



Padmasambhava, whose name means “Lotus Born,” introduced Vajrayana or Lightning Vehicle Buddhism to Tibet.

The Buddhist lama Padmasambhava

Approx. 1500–1600

Tibet

Bronze with gilding, inlaid jewels, and hammered silver

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60B174

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Painted Treasures

While artistic representations of deities derived from hidden treasures are rare, the Asian Art Museum conserves one stunning example. Padmasambhava appears on the upper left, and the Bhutanese lama Pema Lingpa, who recovered the treasure, on the upper right of the *thangka* painting shown here. On the reverse of the painting appear extracts from the *terma* (“hidden treasure”); they are executed in gold script across a brilliant orange stupa.

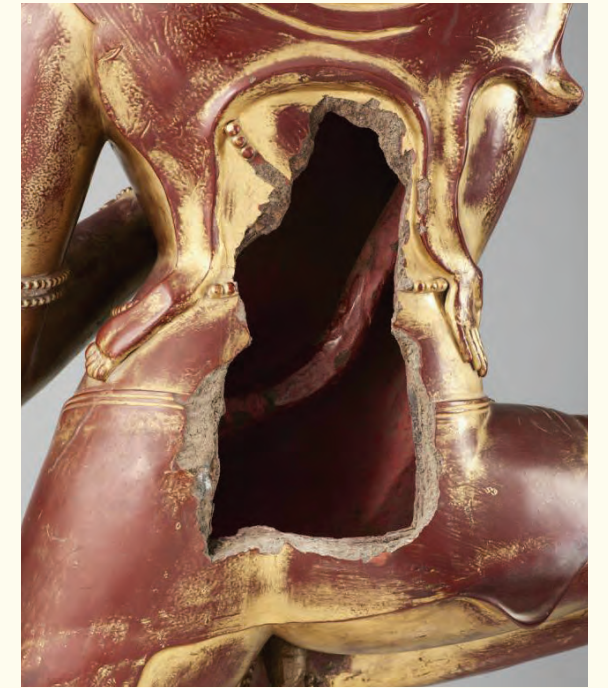


The front (left) and back (right) views of a Buddhist *thangka* painting depicting Guru Drakpochey, a form of Padmasambhava, as the central image on the front of the painting. He holds a scorpion in one of his left hands.

Simhavaktra and Secret Deposits

Traditionally, *dakinis* like Simhavaktra assist in the recovery of “hidden treasure” in the form of sacred texts understood to be perfectly tuned to the needs of their time of recovery. This very sculpture has also enabled the preservation of a different kind of “hidden treasure.” Recent photography has enabled our conservators to discover a deposit of consecration materials behind Simhavaktra’s muzzle. This deposit contained a variety of dried seeds and herbs that had been inserted into the sculpture inside the tied bag visible in the photographs.

Tibetans place texts, herbs, or other objects inside sculptures to consecrate them. Many consecration deposits were plundered in antiquity for the small gems or coins they often contained. Because of these historical occurrences, contemporary scholars who study such objects seldom expect to find the caches intact.



Body cavity of Simhavaktra



Tied bag containing seeds and herbs.

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