

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)**Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder

26.0 x 37.75 inches

Eastern Tibet (Kham region)

Ca. 16th or 17th century

Karma Gadri style

Museum #: 94.008

By Sonal Patel

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The Guhyasamaja, or "Secret Assembly," Tantra and Mandala are fundamental teaching tools which developed at an early date in history to aid the Buddhist practitioner in understanding and practicing Tantric Buddhism to attain enlightenment. Starting at the core of the painting, Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra and his Prajna, Sparshavajri comprise the center of this classic Karma Gadris-style thangka. Moving to the bottom center of the painting and circling around it clockwise, we encounter the jina Buddhas--Vairochana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi--as well as their female counterparts--Lochana, Mamaki, Panduravasini, and Shyama Tara. The key to recognizing the overall message in this painting, as well as the larger tantra itself, is that these deities are not only generated by Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra, but they are all considered to be him as well.

In the center of the painting, Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra is dark blue. Here, the jina Buddha Akshobhya is specifically represented as Guhyasamaja. Akshobhya is specifically located in the east, but in this instance, he is placed in the center of the mandala for reasons which will be discussed below. Irrespective of his position, Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra has three heads and embraces his Prajna. His right head is white and his left head is red. He has a total of six arms that hold various attributes: Starting on his proper right, from top to bottom, Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra holds a *chakra* or wheel, *padma* or lotus, and a *vajra* or adamant sceptor in these hands. From top to bottom on his left side, he holds a *kadgha* or sword, *triratna* or three jewels, and a *ghanta* or bell in these hands. His two principle hands, crossed near the center of his body, hold the *vajra* and *ghanta*. Each attribute represents and symbolizes a specific *kula*, or lineage or family of each Buddha; these attributes simply rotate from hand to hand when a different Buddha is depicted in the central position. Further, it is the proper right principle hand that holds the attribute particular to each *kula* Buddha, while the attribute in the proper left principle hand remains constant in this mandala. Here, for example, the vajra is the *kula* symbol for the Buddha Akshobhya and Guhyasamaja, and the ghanta remains a constant. Moreover, it is the vajra that "appears to rotate in the hands of the deities, thereby also altering the positions of the other attributes. Each [j]ina Buddha carries all five symbols, thus underscoring their interdependence and their identity as a whole" (S. Huntington & J. Huntington, 192).

The other half of this central paired-deity is Sparshavajri. She is light blue and also has a total of six arms; the two hands that are encircled around Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra's neck cannot be seen, but they are holding a *chakra* and *kadgha* in her right and left hands, respectively. The remaining right

hands of Sparshavajri hold a sword and a jewel, while those on her left carry a wheel and a lotus. Visually, the attributes of these two central deities are reflective of the other.

Moving to the bottom center of the painting, the Buddha Vairochana is depicted. In an objective mandala, he is often portrayed in the center, as the central generating deity. This mandala, however, is subjective or considered to be the practitioner's mandala (Thurman, 32). Here, Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra is in the center because he represents the devotee while Vairochana represents the object of attainment. Their position switches from mandala to mandala, hence their function changes in each. With this in mind, the devotee enters the meditational mandala in the east and encounters Vairochana instead of Akshobhya. Here, Vairochana is painted white and has six arms holding various attributes. His right hands carry the *vajra*, *padma*, and *chakra*, while his left arms hold a *kadgha*, *ratna*, and *ghanta*; his principle hands carry the *chakra* and *ghanta*. The *chakra* is his *kula* symbol and the *ghanta* remains a constant.

To Vairochana's proper right is his Prajna, Lochana; she is depicted in white to help the practitioner understand their oneness. In essence, Vairochana and Lochana are considered to be paired-deities, like all of the other figures in this painting who aid the devotee to the final attainment. Lochana's right and left hands carry the same attributes as her Buddha's; her principle hands also hold the wheel and bell.

Above Lochana is the jina Buddha Ratnasambhava. He is the Buddha of the south and is always painted yellow. He is three-headed, with his proper right head painted blue and his proper left head painted white. His six arms also hold the same attributes as the others, but in a different order; the *vajra*, *chakra*, and *triratna* are found in his right hands; the *kadgha*, *padma*, and *ghanta* are in his left. His principle hands carry the *triratna* and *ghanta*. The jewel is his *kula* symbol and the bell remains a constant.

In the upper left corner of the painting, and above Ratnasambhava, is the Prajna of the jina Buddha Akshobhya. Painted dark blue to harmonize with her dark blue Buddha, Mamaki needs to be represented in this painting despite Sparshavajri's presence in the center of the painting; this meditational painting, as well as others of this type, are not complete without all of the jina Buddhas and their Prajnas represented explicitly. Here, she has three heads, the proper right and left are white and red, respectively. Her right arms hold a wheel, blue lotus, and adamantine scepter, while the others carry a sword, jewel, and bell. She reflects the jina Buddha Akshobhya by holding the same principle attributes of the adamantine scepter and bell.

To her proper left, and in the top center of the painting, is the jina Buddha Amitabha. Residing in the west, he is red and has three heads, the proper right is blue and the proper left is white. His right hands carry *avajra*, *chakra*, and *padma*, while his left hands hold a *kadgha*, *ratna*, and *ghanta*. His principle arms hold the *padma* and *ghanta*. The *padma* is his *kula* symbol and the *ghanta* remains a constant.

His red Prajna, Panduravasini, is to his proper left in the upper right corner of the painting. She carries the exact attributes he does to reinforce the dual-nature of the enlightenment process in Buddhism. Her principle hands also carry the *padma* and *ghanta*.

Below her is the green jina Buddha Amoghasiddhi who resides in the north. Here, he has three heads, with the proper right being blue and the proper left being white. His right hands hold a adamantine scepter, wheel, and sword, while his left hands carry a jewel, blue lotus, and bell. His principle

attributes are the sword and bell; often, his *kula* symbol, the sword, can be interchanged with the crossed, double *vajra*, or *vishvavajra*, and the *ghanta* remains a constant.

Finally, in the lower right corner of the painting, below Amoghasiddhi, is his Prajna, Shyama Tara. She is identical to her Buddha in every way, except she carries the *vishvavajra* and the *ghanta* in her principle hands.

The Guhyasamaja Tantra is part of the anuttara-yoga-tantra class of texts and probably dates to as early as the fourth century C.E. This tantra is often known as the supreme and king of all other Highest Yoga Tantras because it is taught to students of Tantric Buddhism first; it is their mastery of this yogic path that allows them to study other tantras (Lodoe, xvi-xviii). This painting of Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra and his retinue stems from the Akshobhya Mandala within the Nishpanna-yogavali, or "Garland of Perfection Yogas" (Wayman, 105). Although in form this painting in the SAMA collection does not appear to be a mandala, it is considered to be one conceptually. The Guhyasamaja Tantra and Mandala are ideally comprised of thirty-two deities, with the central deity generating the others. This central deity in the Guhyasamaja is conceptually always considered to be a paired-deity, or a deity embracing his or her counterpart, despite the physical treatment in the painting.

Here, however, the thirty-two deities representing the principles of this tantra are reduced to only nine figures physically, and only five deities conceptually. Nonetheless, the central paired-deity is of primary importance. Considered a part of the Heruka class of deities, Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra is depicted as a peaceful/wrathful deity. Primarily, all Heruka Buddhas emanate from the jina Buddha Akshobhya, and Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra's nature is one reflective of the mirror-like insight of the Buddha Akshobhya, as well as his representation of the Buddha-mind within the greater concept of Buddha-body, speech, and mind. The Buddhist practitioner does not see the wrath of the Heruka deity; rather, the devotee realizes that this is one form of the Buddha Akshobhya getting rid of all unskillful deeds.

The most significant teachings of the Guhyasamaja are expressed in this Tibetan thangka. One of the methodologies employed by the devotee's *guru*, or spiritual teacher, in understanding the "transformative" nature of Heruka deities is the meditational process. In essence, the Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra Mandala is intended to teach the Buddhist practitioner to visualize him or herself as the central paired-deity in the meditational process, in this case Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra and Sparshavajri. Further, the goal of this tantric meditational mandala is for the devotee to realize that he or she is the generator and the emanator of this particular system, and is therefore considered to be the paired-deity in the center of the painting. It is the "transformation" deity, or Heruka deity in the center of the painting that leads the practitioner to enlightenment. Moreover, the practitioner acquires the wisdom and the compassion of the central deity, the four jina, or "victor" Buddhas and their Prajnas, when following this explicit path of the Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra cycle.

Regardless of the esoteric subject matter contained within this painting, it is simply beautiful to look at. The thangka as a whole is representative of the distinctive seventeenth century C.E. Karma Gadris school. Gega Lama, in his Principles of Tibetan Painting, describes how the founder of the school, Namka Tashi (1500-?) was directed by his teachers to form a style based upon the "Indian standards, the colors and textures to be by the Chinese method and the composition to be in the Tibetan manner"

(47). The net result of this stylistic formulation is one of the most beautiful and elegant of all Tibetan painting styles. The Karma Gadris-style paintings of the late sixteenth through the eighteenth century C.E. are delicately painted in essentially a miniaturist's tradition with intricate, near-microscopic details. They are distinctive in capturing the liveness of bodies and the delicacy of landscapes on a predominantly bare ground which is not prepared for the painting process.

Unique to this Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra painting are two elements. First, this yoga tantra conceptually takes place in a landscape setting. To illustrate this awareness, the artist depicts two landscapes on either side of the painting, near the central paired-deity. They are developed by subtly grading color onto the unpainted ground and appear Chinese in style, and may well reflect a late Yuan or Ming Dynasty Blue-Green style. Second, the names of all of the deities in this meditational cycle are painted in gold on the bare ground. These inscriptions are probably for vivification purposes since they are nearly impossible to see, except by chance incident highlights reflected from the burnished gold. Indeed, this painting is exemplary in capturing the essence of the Guhyasamaja Akshobhyavajra Tantra and Mandala, as well as the Karma Gadris style of painting.

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