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***Che-mchog, or Mahottama Heruka*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

31.5 x 42.5 inches

Southern Tibet or Nepal Himalaya

Ca. 17th century

Folk tradition

Museum #: 92.066

By Sonal Patel

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Buddhist Tantric deities are divided into three forms: peaceful, wrathful, and peaceful/wrathful. The Heruka class of deities belong to the third category. By definition, they are enlightened beings that adopt fierce forms to express their detachment from the world of ignorance. Many of these peaceful/wrathful deities hold attributes, such as skull cups filled with blood which initially generate fear in the observer. However, the fear dissipates immediately when one understands that blood symbolizes worldly attachments and that the 'drinker' is none other than the individual destroying his or her own hindrances to enlightenment. In the SAMA collection, Heruka deities like Guhyasamja Akshobhyavajra, Hevajra, and Che-mchog, or Mahottama Heruka symbolize wisdom's consumption of the lifeblood of ignorance.

Che-mchog, or Mahottama Heruka and his Prajna, Krodheshvari, comprise the center of this painting and are excellent visual and conceptual examples of the esoteric construct of peaceful/wrathful deities in Tibetan Buddhism. The iconography of this central paired-deity and the thangka as a whole also supports the inherent dualism found in this Heruka being. Mahottama, or "Great-Highest," Heruka is painted brown and wears a garland of freshly severed skulls and a tiger's skin. He has seven tiers of heads containing three heads each, and one head at the very top for a total of twenty-two heads. His right head is white, his left is red. His outer ring of twenty-two pairs of brown hands on his right and twenty-one pairs of brown hands on his left hold various ignorant beings, who are both male and female. They symbolize the powers of release that Che-mchog Heruka has to free these unenlightened figures. His principle hands are close to the center of his body and hold men in skull cups. He also tramples on nine men under his right foot and nine nagas under his left.

Depicted in union with her Heruka is Krodhesvari, who is painted blue. She has two tiers of three heads, with her right painted white and her left is red. She has nine pairs of blue hands that comprise the inner ring; each holds either men, bird-faced, or animal-headed creatures which also symbolize the powers of release that the paired-deity possess to free these unenlightened figures. Her ninth pair of hands encircle the neck of Mahottama Heruka and embrace him. A nimbus of fire encircles the paired-deity.

The Nyingma, or "old school" of Tibetan Buddhism figures prominently in this ca.17th century painting of Mahottama, or Che-mchog, Heruka and his retinue. The presence of this sect is clearly depicted by the three red and yellow-capped monks at the top of this painting. Monks of the Nyingma

trace their lineage back to the First Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism and Padmasambhava. Further, followers of the "old school" developed their own iconographic repertoire but adopted the new styles in painting as well (S. Huntington & J. Huntington, 294).

Samantabhadra and his Prajna, Samantabhadri, comprise the fourth figure from the left at the top of this thangka. Blue and white, respectively, these two figures are depicted nude. Because of the paired-deity's location in the painting, almost in the top center, he is considered to be the Adi Buddha of the painting. However, it is known that "the Adi Buddha Samantabhadra appears in the form of the powerful and terrible red-brown Che-mchog Heruka" (Lauf, 144). Here, Che-mchog Heruka manifests the surrounding deities, including the peaceful Adi Buddha Samantabhadra, regardless of the fact that he is considered to be the peaceful/wrathful form of him as well.

The two figures just below the top row of figures appear to be the same. They are most likely to be Vajra Heruka who represents the east and the Buddha Akshobhya/Vajrasattva. The other Heruka Buddhas are represented in this painting as well and surround the central paired-deity. Padma, Karma, and Ratna Heruka are portrayed on the left side of the painting. Padma Heruka is red and represents the west and the Buddha Amitabha; Karma Heruka is green and represents the north and the Buddha Amoghasiddhi; Ratna Heruka is yellow and represents the south and the Buddha Ratnasambhava. On the other side of the painting, there are two Buddha Herukas. They represent the center and the Buddha Vairocana. All of the Buddha Herukas are conceptually depicted with their Prajnas. Here, they are all multi-headed and have six arms wielding the *pasha*, or noose, *kapala*, or skull cup, *kartrika*, or skull chopper, *khadgha*, or sword, *danda*, or stick, *khatvanga*, or staff, and the bow and arrow.

Across the bottom of the painting, the four lokapalas, or guardian kings, are represented. Seen in the lower left, Virudhaka holds the *khadgha*, or sword, and Dhritrarashtra holds the *vina*, or lute. In the lower right, Vaishravana holds the *dhvaja*, or painted banner, and Virupaksha holds the *chaitya*, or reliquary mound. A offering bowl is depicted in the lower center of the painting. The four *vahanas*, or vehicles, of the jina Buddhas are seen inside of the fence-like structure at the bottom of the painting; the elephant and lion are on the left and represent Akshobhya and Vairocana, respectively; the horse and peacock are on the right and represent Ratnasambhava and Amitabha, respectively.

The Buddhist practitioner looks at this painting of Che-mchog Heruka and his retinue and recognizes that it is inherently a mandala. In *Secret Doctrines of the Tibetan Books of the Dead*, it is noted that when the Mandala of the Five Herukas is visualized, Che-mchog Heruka appears above it initially; the vision transforms to Mahottama, or Che-mchog Heruka at the center of his own mandala emanating the peaceful Adi Buddha Samantabhadra, and the group of "five blood-drinking deities in order to annihilate the five principal failings human behavior" (Lauf, 143). These figures are "related to the transmigratory visions in the Bardo, or "Between" state--the period between death and rebirth" (Rhie & Thurman, 60).

Che-mchog Heruka and the heruka deities are manifestations of the jina Buddha Akshobhya. He, like each of the other four jina Buddhas, represents one of the five insights that define the Buddha's enlightenment, namely, the mirror-like insight. In most meditations, the Tantric practitioner realizes that the heruka deity is a form of the jina Buddha Akshobhya, who, through his wrath, rids the practitioner all unskillful deeds. These deeds are the product of ignorance that afflicts all sentient

beings. Since ignorance hinders religious attainment, it is the goal of the practitioner to gain wisdom and attain freedom from the world of enlightenment.

Che-mchog Heruka and his Prajna, Krodesvari, also function as "transformative deities" through whom the devotee realizes his or her yogic potential. During the meditations, the practitioner focuses on awakening the *chakras*, or internal energy centers, and expanding his or her consciousness through the *nadis*, or internal channels. Ultimately, the devotee realizes that he or she is identical with the deity.

The process of meditating on the Tantric herukas is one of the methodologies employed by the *gurus*, or spiritual teachers, of Tibet. Since Tantra acknowledges various levels of an individual's ability, disciples showing the highest potential are initiated into more esoteric meditations at an earlier stage. The meditations involve visualizing the herukas while reciting secret *mantras*, or spiritual chants, and making offerings. These deities become the *ishtadevatas*, or vow-bound, "chosen-deities" who serve as personal protectors for the meditator.

Che-mchog Heruka is also a guide to one's own enlightenment. The details of this heruka mandala maps the yogic stages and attainments through which the devotee must progress on his or her quest. The fundamental aim of the practitioner is to realize him or herself as Che-mchog Heruka in his peaceful/wrathful form. Then, as the central paired-deity, the practitioner releases other sentient beings from the banal world of ignorance through his or her newly acquired wisdom and compassion.

#### References:

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