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Thangka, painting

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

25.5 x 33.75 inches Central Tibet

Ca. 18th century

Museum #: 92.051

By Sonal Patel

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Based on the Hevajra Tantra, this painting portrays the Buddha Hevajra and his Prajna, Nairatmya, or "Non-self", surrounded by a retinue of eight dakinis, or female "sky-goers". Although in form this ca. 18th century C.E. thangka does not appear to be a Hevajra Mandala rooted in the tantra of the same name, it is nonetheless considered to be one conceptually. The painting is roughly divided into three sections, the upper, middle, and lower. The upper portion contains ten figures that appear to emanate from the central paired-deity based on the rainbow-like beams of light that connect one to the other. The middle section predominantly portrays the central paired-deity of Hevajra and his Prajna, Nairatmya. The lower portion contains the eight female dakinis, as well as three figures at the bottom center of the painting.

Starting in the center of the painting, we encounter a relatively standard Hevajra-type iconography. Hevajra and Nairatmya dance on a solar disk while embracing each other. He is light blue in color like his Prajna, but since his body is smeared with ashes he appears to be dark blue. Nairatmya has two arms and two legs. One arm encircles the neck of Hevajra while the other wields a skull chopper, or *kartrika*. Hevajra wears a garland of freshly severed heads, and himself has eight heads, sixteen arms, and four legs. His right head is white and his left head is red; the others remain indiscernible. His eight proper right hands hold skull cups with animals, while his eight proper left hands hold skull cups with human beings in each. Specifically, the skullcups in his proper right hands carry a cat, lion, man, camel, ox, donkey, horse, and elephant from top to bottom. According to Snellgrove's translation, the skullcups in his left hands are intended to carry earth, water, air, fire, moon, sun, Yama, the lord of death, and Vaishravana, the lord of wealth (111); perhaps the figures in the skullcups here, however abstract, are intended to represent these eight elements. Hevajra also tramples on four nondescript beings in this painting that are intended to symbolize Mara, or Death; in the text itself, four beings of the Hindu pantheon are represented underfoot, namely, Brahma, creator of the Hindu pantheon, a *yaksha*, or male nature spirit, Yama, lord of death, and Indra, king of the gods.

Immediately below the central paired-deity, the eight dakinis who form their retinue are depicted in a semi-circular configuration. Their names are listed in David Snellgrove's translation of the Hevajra Tantra as Gauri, Chauri, Vetali, Ghasmari, Pukkasi, Shabari, Chandali, and Dombini (111-112). Each female deity is representative of a cardinal or intermediary direction and each hold identifying attributes in their hands. I will begin describing the dakinis by first looking at the accounts in the Hevajra Tantra, and second, comparing the textual to the visual. First, Gauri represents the east and is black in color; she wields a *kartrika* in her right hand and a fish in her left. Identical to the textual source, Gauri is the fifth dakini from the left in this thangka. Second, Chauri represents the southern

direction and is golden (like the sun) in color; she wields a drum in her right hand and a wild boar in her left. Chauri is the third dakini from the left in this thangka, but she is not identical to the text since she is red in color here. Third, Vetali represents the west and is red-gold in color; she wields a tortoise in her right hand and a skullcup in her left. There are no textual similarities here, except for the skullcup in her left hand; perhaps Vetali is the first dakini from the left even though she is yellow in color and holds a fish in her right hand. Fourth, Ghasmari represents the northern direction and is green in color; she wields a snake in her right hand and a skullcup in her left. Identical to the textual source, Ghasmari is the seventh dakini from the left in this painting. Fifth, Pukkasi represents the northeast and is sapphire in color; she wields a lion in her right hand and an axe in her left. Pukkasi is the sixth dakini from the left but varies from the textual source; here, she is black in color and holds a staff, or *khatvanga*, in her left hand. Sixth, Shabari represents the southeast and is moonstone in color; she wields a monk in her right hand and a fan in her left. Shabari is the fourth dakini from the left and deviates from the text in that, here, she wields a staff in her left hand. Seventh, Chandali represents the southwest and is dark in color (like a cloud); she wields a wheel in her right hand and a plough in her left. Here, Chandali is probably the second dakini from the left and is not identical to the text since she is black in color and wields an unidentifiable object in her right hand and a staff in her left. Eighth, Dombini represents the northwest and is golden in color; she wields a *vajra* in her right hand and points with a finger in her left. Dombini is most likely the eighth dakini from the left in this thangka; here, she varies from the text in that she is green, yellow, and black in color and wields unidentifiable objects in both hands. All eight dakinis dance upon a single human figure underfoot.

After the iconography of the eight dakinis is established despite several anomalies to the textual tradition, a pattern can be seen in the physical layout of the dakinis' semi-circle. From left to right, the four cardinal directions alternate and their intermediary points are located inbetween. For example, the first dakini from the left is the west, the third is the south, the fifth is the east, and the seventh is the north; the intermediary points from left to right are southwest, southeast, northeast, and northwest and are represented in the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth dakinis, respectively.

Emanating from the central paired-deity are ten figures comprising the upper portion of this Tibetan thangka. The Nyingma, or "old school" of Tibetan Buddhism figures prominently in this ca.18th century painting of Hevajra and his retinue. The presence of this sect is clearly depicted by the four red-capped monks emanating from Hevajra 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). Also in the upper portion, the first figure from the left, located in the second semi-circular row from the top is Vajrayogini. She stands in her classic pose and wields her primary attributes, a skull chopper in her proper right hand and a skullcup in her proper left. The deity immediately opposite her, or the fifth figure from the left in the second row is Yamantaka (Leidy & Thurman, 102). Although badly damaged, the figure at the top center of the painting is probably the Adi Buddha Vajradhara, who is the primary emanator of this entire mandalic system. The remaining three figures are unidentifiable.

Just below the eight dakinis, the lower portion of this painting depicts three more figures. The first figure from the left is not known by name but is a seated male figure with a *kadgha*, or sword, in his proper right hand and a skullcup in his left; he also sits on a human figure. A form of the protective deity Mahakala is in the bottom center of the thangka. He is a blue figure who wields a *kartrika* and

kapala, or skullcup in his proper right and left hands, respectively. He is cloaked in a tiger's skin and also stands on a human figure. Finally, the third figure from the left is not known by name but he is blue in color and rides a horse; this part of the painting is badly damaged and a proper identification is not possible. On many Tibetan thangkas, these lower figures are often *ishtadevatas*, or vow-bound, "chosen deities" who serve as personal protectors of the patron who commissioned the painting; it is likely that these figures are *ishtadevatas* as well.

Regardless of the plethora of details that are present in this Tibetan thangka depicting the Hevajra Mandala, the Buddhist practitioner focuses upon the most significant teachings that are rooted in the Hevajra Tantra. First, Hevajra is part of the Heruka class of deities and is depicted in a peaceful/wrathful form. Primarily, all heruka Buddhas emanate from the jina Buddha Akshobhya, and Hevajra'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.

Second, 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 Hevajra 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 Hevajra and Nairatmya. 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.

Finally, this tantra teaches the student that state of enlightenment can only be reached if it is understood in a dual manner--both the male and female deity are needed for the acquisition of compassion and wisdom, respectively. In this light, *shunyata*, or the absolute void can finally be attained.

References:

Huntington, Susan L., and Huntington, John C. *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pala India (8th -12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy*. Seattle: The Dayton Art Institute, 1990.

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