

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Vajrabhairava and Dharma Protectors of the Gelukpa Order*** [\(Image\)](#)

Thangka, painting

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

Ca. 19th century

Museum #: 97.276

By Cathleen Cummings

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This painting represents the most important transformative deities of the Gelukpa order. At center is Vajrabhairava, a wrathful manifestation of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, with his consort Vajravetalia. To his left is Cakrasamvara in union with his consort Vajravarahi, and to his right is Guhyasamaja, in union with Sparsavajra. These three deities, Vajrabhairava, Guhyasamaja, and Cakrasamvara, represent three of the four main tantric meditations practiced in the Gelukpa school. The *Guhyasamaja-tantra* emphasizes the generation of an illusory or subtle body through yoga; the *Cakrasamvara-tantra* emphasizes the generation of Clear Light, associated with the cultivation of wisdom; the *Vajrabhairava-tantra* emphasizes both in balance.

Like sutras, tantras are often considered to be the teachings of the Buddha Sakyamuni; unlike sutras, which were taught by the Buddha directly during his lifetime, the tantras were taught secretly to special disciples while the Buddha was in the form of one or another meditational deities or ideal forms. Tantric Buddhism practiced in Tibet, while incorporating the non-secret teachings of the sutras, teaches paths for liberation from cyclical existence, or the attainment of one's own Buddhahood, based upon the discourses found specifically in tantric literature.

The group of tantras which describe the meditations of Vajrabhairava belong to the class of tantras called *annuttara-yoga-tantra*, the highest yoga tantra class. Tantras of this type involve deity yoga -- the self-generation of the meditator as the deity, the "transformation of one's mind and body into the mind and body of a Buddha." Tantras in this class are further subclassed as either male (yogin) or female (yogini) tantras according to the path taken to achieve this union with the deity. Yogini tantras emphasize practices related to recognition of and identification with Clear Light; the tantras of Heruka-Cakrasamvara are the primary tantras of the yogini class. Yogin tantras emphasize practices related to the generation or experience of the "illusory body" through deity yoga. Yogin tantras are further divided according to the path of transformation used: desire, hatred, or ignorance. The tantras of Vajrabhairava (and other forms of Yamantaka) are the primary yogin tantras that use hatred as the path of transformation.

The rituals for the invocation and yoga of Vajrabhairava aim at the attainment by the yogin of superhuman powers related to the Vajrabhairava path of hatred, particularly powers of killing, subduing, driving away, and controlling. Since the performance of yoga results in the union of the devotee and the deity, the rituals performed by the devotee in yogic meditation are in fact performed by Vajrabhairava himself. Some of these rituals work through the yogin's powers over Yama, since Vajrabhairava is considered the overcoming of Yama.

Tenets specific to *Vajrabhairava-tantra* were revealed to Tsong kha-pa, the founder of the Gelugpa sect, by the bodhisattva Manjusri. According to this revelation, doctrines of bliss and emptiness as explained in the *Samvara-tantra* (the primary yogini tantra), as well as illusory body doctrines as expounded in the *Guhyasamaja-tantra* (the primary yogin tantra using desire as the path) are included in the *Vajrabhairava-tantra*. Thus, the *Vajrabhairava-tantra* brings together the many practices of the tantric deities important to the Gelugpa sect.

At the top of the mandala is a representation of Tsong-kha-pa, the founder of the Gelukpa order, flanked by his two principle disciples. Other *Dharmapala*, Protectors of the Teachings, are also illustrated here, including Six-Armed White Mahakala, Six-Armed Black Mahalaka, Vajrapani, Yama, Vaisravana, and Palden Lhamo.

#### References:

Daniel Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra*, Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1991. p. 21.

Cozort, p. 21.

Bulcsu Silos, *The Vajrabhairava Tantras*, Tring, U.K.: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996.

Cozort, p. 26.

Siklos, p. 4.

Siklos, p. 6.

Siklos, p. 4; see also fn. 6.

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