

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Mandala of Peaceful and Other Deities of the Bardo*** [\(Image\)](#)

Thangka, painting

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

21.0 x 27.0 inches

Central Tibet

Ca. 17th century?

Musuem #: 97.071

By Cathleen Cummings

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The Bardo is the state of existence which comes between death and rebirth. Bardo translates as "the Between" and every person who dies makes a journey in the Between before reincarnation or enlightenment. Visions of numerous deities, both peaceful and wrathful in appearance, confront each individual there. These deity-visions are emanations of each person's own internal buddha-nature, and they serve the individual as his or her guide through the realms of the Bardo. Recognizing their true nature leads the individual to enlightenment and liberation from the Bardo experience.

This painting is a mandala encompassing all of the forty-two peaceful Bardo deities. The central figure is the Adibuddha Samantabhadra who is shown in union with his consort. These two are the mandala's progenitors, the source from which the rest of the deities in the mandala are considered to emanate. Samantabhadra and his consort are usually depicted unclothed, so their depiction here is somewhat unusual. Surrounding them are the Five Archetype Buddhas and their Five Consorts; the eight male and eight female bodhisattvas; and the four male and four female directional guardians. The six Buddhas of the Six Realms of Existence at the top of the painting completes the mandala of peaceful deities of the Bardo. Additionally, images of the ten Vidhyadharas or Knowledge-Holding Deities, and of some of the guardian and attendant deities of the wrathful deity cycle are also represented, including the eight animal-headed dakinis.

Directly below Samantabhadra is the white-bodied figure of Vajrasattva, a symbolic deity who represents, and stands in for, the meditator. Vajrasattva is also considered to be the embodiment of all one-hundred- and- ten deities of the mandalas of peaceful and wrathful Bardo deities. Above Samantabhadra, at top center of the painting, is a representation of Tsong kha-pa, the founder of the Gelugpa sect, flanked by his two principle disciples. His presence indicates that the Gelugpa patronage of this work.

Since recognition of the Bardo deities is essential for the achievement of enlightenment and liberation upon death, one must practice visualizing these deities during one's lifetime in order to become accustomed to their appearance. Visualization practice helps the individual to combat the fear and surprise that often accompany the experience of the Bardo visions. Paintings of the peaceful and wrathful cycles of deities, such as the present example, function as meditational devices to aid this practice.

References:

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