

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

18.75 x 21.5 inches

Tsang District

Ca. 15th or 16th century

Menri of the Sakya pa style

Museum #: 96.018

By Ariana Maki &amp; Chaya Chandrasekhar

3 June, 1998

Avalokiteshvara is the Bodhisattva of absolute compassion who descends into the hells to help afflicted beings better their rebirth. Here he is shown as Rakta, or Red, Avalokiteshvara in the center of a mandala. The specific identification of this mandala is unclear and the ways in which it is meditated on, or the soteriological methodology it communicates, remains speculative until further study.

Rakta Avalokiteshvara is shown as a paired deity, in sexual union with his female counterpart. The prayer beads held in his upper right hand, the lotus held in his upper left hand and the jewel of enlightenment enclosed in his primary hands, also identify the figure as Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara. Although a Bodhisattva, here Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara is probably shown as a fully enlightened Buddha, identical with the five jina Buddhas. This is evident as the petals in the four cardinal directions contain images of Rakta Shadakshari in union with four of the Buddha prajnas. Although difficult to distinguish, Mamaki is depicted in the lower petal. Moving clockwise, Sapta Lochana, probably Vajradatvishvari and Shyama Tara are depicted in the other three petals. Although no distinguishing attributes allow a conclusive identification, the jina Buddha Amitabha's female counterpart, Pandura, is probably understood to be in union with Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara. By extension, it is possible that Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara is being equated with the jina Buddhas and is thus a fully enlightened Buddha himself.

Images of the Buddha prajnas, however now without their male counterparts, are repeated in the intermediary petals of the central lotus, further emphasizing that Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara may be identical with the five fully enlightened jina Buddhas. The square around the central lotus is marked with the jina colors: blue, yellow, red, green and white (which is conceptually present in the center). Four male figures are depicted directly above each of the petals in the intermediary directions which contain the images of the prajnas. Although indistinguishable through hand gestures or attributes, these figures may be the primary Bodhisattvas, or masters of the house, of each of the jina Buddhas. Thus, the groups of figures in the central section of the mandala repeatedly illustrate to the practitioner the shared identities of Avalokiteshvara and the jina Buddhas.

The outer ring of the mandala is divided into eight sections each representing a charnel field. Charnel fields are places where the dead are cremated and the remains are devoured by carrion-eaters. In the

Buddhist context, charnel fields are common settings for Tantric meditations and attainments. In this painting, each field is depicted with a specific Mahasiddha or great adept, tree, stupa, carrion-eaters, treasures and so on. The set of eight charnel fields occur frequently in mandalas of various types in Tantric Buddhism.

Smaller, subsidiary mandalas are depicted in each of the four corners of the painting. The top left mandala is that of the jina Buddha Amitabha who is the progenitor of Avalokiteshvara. Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara, as the emanator of four protective deities, appears at the center of the mandala in the top right. Vajravarahi is represented in the center of the lower right mandala. She is accompanied by a group of four dakinis who alternate with depictions of the vase of immortality. In the center of the lower left mandala is a fierce, white paired-deity. The specific identification of this figure, and thus the mandala, is unclear.

Along the top of the painting are fifteen images of various deities and teachers, illustrating the lineage of the Nyingma sect. These include figures of Amitabha, depicted in the far left, followed by white Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara and Padmasambhava, the founder of the Tantric teachings of the Nyingma sect. A series of Mahasiddhas and other teachers occupy the top right section of the painting but are indistinguishable due to the damaged condition of the painting. However, two figures wear black caps that identify them as Karmapa Lamas who are considered to be direct manifestations of Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara in Tibet.

Figures of the donor of this mandala and various protective deities are depicted along the bottom of the painting. Identifiable among them are two images of Hayagriva, the angry form of Avalokiteshvara as well as an image of Mahakala, also a fierce emanation of the Bodhisattva. The goddess, Palden Lhamo, seated on her mule-like *khyang*, and Pehar, with the characteristic brimmed cap, are also present.

The painting is probably a realization mandala in which the practitioner may envision him or herself as being identical with the central deity. Subsequently, the meditator realizes that Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara is a fully enlightened Buddha, no different from the five jina Buddhas. Being identical with Rakta Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara, the devotee realizes that he or she is also indistinguishable from the jina Buddhas. In this manner, the mandala may serve to map out the attainment process of the meditator.

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