

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Prajnaparamita*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

28.5 x 37.75 inches

Central Tibet

Ca. 17th century

Museum #: 96.015

By Natalie R. Marsh

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Prajnaparamita, the goddess depicted in the center of this ca. 17th century folk tradition thangka, is the paradigmatic goddess from whom virtually all other Buddhist goddesses arise. She is the ultimate Buddha Matri, or "Mother of Buddhas," making her an enlightened being as well, and thus, a female Buddha. Prajnaparamita is identified in this painting by the small delicate linear gold painted rendering of a book resting on the lotus in her left hand. This book is the goddess' namesake text, the Prajnaparamita Sutra, or the "perfection of wisdom. She, and the text, encompass and represent the wisdom that all enlightened beings must attain, and subsequently both are seen as the progenitors of Buddhas.

The central goddess is depicted with four arms and is seated in lotus position on a lion throne. In her left hand she holds a lotus, on which rests the book described above. Her right hand also holds a lotus that supports a vertically balanced *vajra*. Her primary hands are held in front of her torso and make the gesture of teaching, *dharmachakra mudra*. This combination of iconography is known in other painted examples and its combined meaning is clear.<sup>1</sup> The *vajra* symbolizes adamantine compassion and the realization of bliss which, when combined with the book, representing the perfection of wisdom, creates full enlightenment. The goddess' primary hands held in *dharmachakra mudra* refer to the teaching capacity of the goddess, and subsequently, the purpose of the specific teaching which she personifies. Two bodhisattvas flank Prajnaparamita and appear to vary only in the gestures of the raised hands of each. The bodhisattva to the left holds his raised left hand in *vitarka mudra* and that to the right of the goddess displays his raised right hand in *abhaya mudra*, the gesture of fearlessness. The lowered hands of each are placed in *varada mudra*, the boon-granting gesture. The primary deity and the two bodhisattvas are painted with golden details in the ornamentation and garments not unlike the painted lotuses and attributes.

Around the central deity are 500 generalized Buddhas in robes of gold leaf. This multiplicity speaks to the goddess' role as mother and generator of enlightened minds. Each of the 500 Buddhas are represented in groups of 4 or 5 in rectangular divisions of space. These space cells are flatly painted in one of six colors including two shades of red, dark blue or black, green, or yellow. These are arranged to create a pieced design, not unlike the robes worn by Shakyamuni in numerous paintings. The gestures and attributes of the Buddhas alternate between *dhyanamudra*, or meditation gesture; *dhyanamudra* with a begging bowl; *bhumisparsha mudra*, the earth-touching gesture; *dharmachakra*

*mudra*, the teaching gesture; among others. This division and iconography do not seem to correlate to a known text or practice and may simply be a local aesthetic preference.

The Prajnaparamita Sutra was discovered by the great master, Nagarjuna, who was said to have been born in the first century B.C.E. and died in the fifth century C.E. Western scholars believe that the Nagarjuna who introduced the "perfection of wisdom" lived during the 2nd century C.E. The Nagarjuna of earlier and later periods may have been numerous other individuals with the same name. Nagarjuna was said to have been approached by the nagas, sacred serpents or dragons, after having given one of his teachings. He was invited to descend under the sea to take a look at several texts the serpents thought he might appreciate, given the nature of his lecture earlier. He accepted their invitation only to find many of the primary texts of Mahayana Buddhism; the Prajnaparamita Sutra, the Pure Land Sutras, the Lotus Sutra, and others. After studying the texts for many years he included them in his teachings and introduced many to the rediscovered knowledge.<sup>2</sup> His own understanding of the Prajnaparamita Sutra is documented in his *Mulamadhyamikakarika*.<sup>3</sup>

The Prajnaparamita Sutra is known in many lengths and abridged versions. These range from the single ligature, or letter (the letter A), titled the One Letter Sutra, to the 25,000 Line Sutra. One of the most popular versions is the Astasahasrikaprajnaparamita Sutra, or the "8,000 Line Prajnaparamita Sutra," held in high esteem by all Mahayana traditions.<sup>4</sup> Totaling 18, the versions range only in length, not in subject matter, which remains consistently devoted to the description and explanation of the concept of perfect wisdom. In fact, each text, regardless of length, provides a map to perfect wisdom and enlightenment for the practitioner. However, this is a map that is partially constructed by, and dependent on, the interpretation of the reader himself. This is due to the indescribability of ultimate reality, or pure presence, that the text attempts to communicate. The difficulty in grasping this essence is evident in a few of the terms used to describe Prajnaparamita, the Mother of Buddhas: indefinable, ungraspable, unlocatable, unapproachable, inconceivable, etc. <sup>5</sup>

Though it is a difficult text and concept with which to grapple, merely reading the sutra will result in positive energy, or *punya*. Even taking *darshan*, or visual exchange, of the text, in its book form, is beneficial. Many Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries possess Prajnaparamita Sutras that are placed in a shrine like an image. The book is sometimes decorated with garlands and *tika*, dressed in cloth, and surrounded with the same ritual implements and objects placed around images of other Buddhas. These texts are treated with the respect normally bestowed on images and many are rarely opened or read. Occasionally, the book is even the source of healing powers passed on by a worn wooden stick placed on the text by a priest then rubbed on the stated sore spot of a practitioner.<sup>6</sup>

1 Rhie, Marylin, and Robert Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, 314-315.

2 Thurman, Robert in his Foreword to Hixon, Lex, *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra*, xii.

3 Hixon, Lex, *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra*, 7.

4 Thurman, Robert in his Foreword to Hixon, Lex, *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the*

Prajnaparamita Sutra, xiii.

5 Hixon, Lex, *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra*, 13-14.

6 Huntington, J. C., taken from discussion and photodocumentary evidence from Nepal

#### References:

Conze, Edward, ed., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, 1954.

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