

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)

Mahakala

By Tom Suchan and Chaya Chandrasekhar

8 June, 1998

Mahakala is the fierce manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of absolute compassion, and the primary Dharmapala, or "Dharma protector" in Tibetan Buddhism. Mahakala's name translates as the "Great Black," one, or "Great time." The latter is a reference to the deity's ability to transcend all time. More than seventy-five forms of Mahakala are known in Tibet where he is generally called mGon po, or the "Master," "Lord," or "Protector."

Mahakala is characteristically depicted with an angry face, pot-bellied, and standing on a human corpse or the elephant-headed, Hindu god, Ganesha, who, in this case, signifies hindrances. He is dark, often black or blue in color, although the color may vary depending on the specific form being represented. In the SAMA collection, a red Mahakala, associated with the intermediary southwest direction, is depicted in [#97.085](#), a portrait of Bromdon. Sita, or white, Mahakala is seen as a subsidiary figure in [#93.014](#), a large painting of the protector, Gur-gyi Mgon Po. In each of his two, four, six or sixteen hands, Mahakala holds the *kapala* and *katrika*, a trident, *mala*, or prayer beads, a noose, the heart of a vanquished enemy, a *damaru*, or kettle drum, sword, *khatvanga* and so on. His primary attributes are the *kapala*, or skull cup, and the *katrika*, or chopper. The skull cup and its contents represent the five sense offerings, while the chopper represents detachment from samsaric existence.

Mahakala in his six-armed form, trampling Ganesha, is the central figure in the SAMA painting, [#97.082](#). In his upper left and right hands he holds the severed skin of an elephant, symbolizing the ability to overcome delusion. Along with the elephant skin, he holds prayer beads and a trident in his upper right and left hands respectively. In his lower right hand he holds the heart of an enemy who hinders religious attainment. In his lower left hand he holds a noose. The *katrika* and *kapala* are held in each of his primary hands. He wears a garland of freshly severed heads around his body while a green snake, tied across his shoulder and body, serves as the sacred thread. A blue Buddha figure, making *bhumisparsha*, or earth-touching, gesture, is depicted in the center of Mahakala's elaborate hair arrangement. This figure is probably the Buddha Shakyamuni or, the jina Buddha Akshobhya.

In the top center is a representation of the Adi Buddha, Vajradhara, the progenitor of all the figures in the painting. Two Mahasiddha-type figures flank Vajradhara. Other figures along the top row include various teachers. Two Buddha figures are depicted directly below the teachers in the top left and right corners of the painting. The Buddha on the left is white and makes the *Dharmachakra*, or teaching, gesture. The damaged condition of the painting obscures the proper identification of the Buddha on the right. Manjushri, the Buddha or Bodhisattva of absolute wisdom, is depicted on the left, within the flames that surround Mahakala. On the right is the Buddha Amitayus, seated in the meditation posture, while holding the vase of life.

Four figures, probably belonging to Mahakala's retinue, are shown on either side of Mahakala. The

two figures on the left stand on human corpses and hold various attributes. The figures on the right ride on animal mounts. The top right figure may be Mahakala's primary attendant, Dugon Trakshad, who rides on a black horse. Dugon Trakshad generally carries a flaming sword in his right hand and a skull cup in his left. In the SAMA painting, however, the figure on the black horse holds a *kapala* in his left hand and a banner trident in his right. The lower right figure, riding on a mule-like animal is probably Palden Lhamo, the female attendant of Mahakala. In each of her four hands she holds a sword, a trident and the skull-cup and chopper.

The figure in the bottom center is possibly Kshetrapala, who frequently attends to Mahakala. He is known to ride on a black bear while holding a *vajra* chopper and skull cup. However, the sketchy representation of the animal mount in the SAMA painting does not allow a definite attribution. Along the bottom of the painting, on either side of the lower central figure, are representations of the guardians of the ten directions, each on his specific animal mount. Included in this group, and easily identifiable, are Indra on the upper left, Nairiti on a human corpse and Varuna on the crocodile to the lower central figure's immediate right. A Multi-headed figure of Brahma is depicted on the far right side of the painting. A figure holding a trident and skull cup, wearing a long skirt, is depicted above the image of Indra on the left. This may be the goddess, Ekajathi, often considered a member of Mahakala's retinue. In the corresponding position on the right is a bull-headed figure, probably Yama, on a bull.

This painting is indicative of the Tibetan folk style. Works by artists not trained in a specific school of painting generally constitute the folk painting tradition in Tibet. Although whimsical in appearance, this painting makes for a powerful representation of the deity.

In contrast to the folk tradition, [#93.010](#), a second painting of the six-armed Mahakala in the SAMA collection, is a typical example of the classical style of Tibetan painting. Characterized by finely rendered figures, elegant refinement and evident vivacity, the classical style was common in Central Tibet, a region close to the main religious centers.

Mahakala is here represented in the center as a paired-deity, in union with his female counterpart. He has three heads, and six arms. In his upper right and left hands he holds a sword and elephant goad respectively. In his lower right hand he holds a *danda*, or staff and in his lower left hand he holds a noose. In his primary hands he holds a *katrika* and *kapala* while supporting his female counterpart who is light blue in color. She holds a *kapala* in her left hand and probably a *katrika* in her right hand which is held behind the male figure. The attributes differ from the normal set of six discussed above suggesting that this figure is a specific form of the deity that is not identified in common published literature.

In the top center is a representation of Vajrasattva in union with his female counterpart, Sattvavajri. He is the practitioner who envisions all the other deities in the mandala. Directly below him is Manjushri with a raised sword in his right hand. To his top right is an image of a seated Buddha making *abhaya*, or fear not, gesture. To Manjushri's upper left is a representation of Padmasambhava, indicating that this painting probably belonged to the Nyingma order. Figures of lineage teachers and great masters are represented in the top row of the painting.

In the bottom center, directly below the main image, is a representation of a two-armed Mahakala accompanied by a gray hag-like female figure. Mahakala holds a *vajra*-chopper in his raised right hand and a *kapala* in his left. The female figure holds a *kapala* in her left hand and a trident in her right. Although male and female, the two are not a paired deity as they are not in sexual union and are depicted in a similar manner to Yama and his sister Yamari.

A total of twenty-two other figures accompany the central paired-deity. They appear to be male and female members of Mahakala's retinue. All are depicted as energetic, fierce figures, some with animal heads. Their animated pose and dynamic colors help manifest the idea that Mahakala is the energetic compassionate aspect of enlightenment waiting to be realized within every practitioner.

As in the two Mahakala images discussed above, the skull-cup and chopper are generally the primary attributes of the deity. However, several forms of Mahakala do not carry the skull-cup and chopper and are, instead, identified by various other attributes and characteristics. Two such forms of Mahakala included in the SAMA collection are [#95.012](#) and [#93.017](#).

Mahapandaka Karma ([#95.012](#)) is the Genderless, or Eunuch, Mahakala who is commonly venerated by the Nyingma sect. Mahapandaka Karma holds a lance or banner to the sky in his right hand, and a tulip-shaped heart and kidneys of a vanquished enemy in his left. His name alludes to the enlightened state which transcends gender and all levels of self-identity and attachment. The Adi Buddha Samantabhadra is depicted directly above the main figure. Vajrasattva is represented on the proper right side of Samantabhadra and the Bodhisattva Maitreya is shown seated in a relaxed posture on the proper left side.

Seven other forms of Mahakala are depicted around Mahapandaka Karma. Although inscribed, the illegible condition of the script prevents positive identification of each of these figures. The crow-faced Mahakala, known in Tibet as Mgon Po Bya rog Dong, is depicted in the lower left corner of the painting. He is shown seated on a horse holding a bow and arrow in his hands. Mgon Po Tag Shon Ma, the two-armed Mahakala who rides a tiger is depicted in the lower right corner of the painting.

The second of the more uncommon forms of Mahakala represented in the SAMA collection is [#93.017](#). The black-cloaked Mahakala, known in Tibet as Ber nag Mgon Po, wears the robe of a necromancer on his back. He raises a skull cup to his mouth with his left hand, while brandishing a *phur-pa* in his right. The *phur-pa*, literally translated as "[ritual] tent stake," is a ceremonial implement used to pin down and transform evil and negative forces.

The four-armed Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara, the spiritual source of Mahakala, is depicted directly above Ber nag Mgon Po. To his right is the Buddha Shakyamuni who makes the *bhumisparsha*, or earth-touching, gesture with his right hand. Padmasambhava who is the Buddhist necromancer par excellence, is depicted on the left. In Tibet, Padmasambhava is renowned for his ability to suppress and convert evil spirits who hinder Buddhist religious attainment.

On either side of the main figure are two skull cups with *torma* and sense offerings. Below the main figure are three other forms of Mahakala. In the center is a fierce red colored form of the deity who

holds a banner and a skull cup in his hands. The figures on the right and left, each hold a *phur-pa* and a skull cup in the same manner as the Ber nag Mgon Po. They probably serve as Ber nag Mgon Po's acolytes who aid the devotee along his or her religious path.

References:

Ladrang kalsang. *The Guardian Deities of Tibet*. Dharmasala: Little Lhasa Publications, 1996.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Rene de. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. Reprint. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1975.

Rhie, Marylin and Robert A.F. Thurman. *Wisdom and Compassion*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1991.

This WWW server is provided by **The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art** (<http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/>), College of the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA.

Updated November 2004

URL http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/sama/*Essays/AM95.006PadmPar.html

© All images on this site are copyrighted. Unauthorized use or electronic dissemination is prohibited by applicable law.

© Text copyright as noted

© Front graphic copyright Andrew LaMoreaux

This Web page may be linked to any other Web pages; permission is not required. The contents, however, may not be altered. Unauthorized use or electronic dissemination is prohibited by applicable laws. Please contact the maintainer for permission to re-publish any material.