

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Offerings to Mahakala*** ([Image](#))

Xylograph on silk
 Silk and printing ink
 13.0 x 22.5 inches
 Ca. 19th century
 Museum #: 92.061

By Chad Sawyer
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The Dharmapalas are fierce beings whose function is to protect and maintain Buddhist truth, or Dharma, against enemies both internal and external. This piece is concerned with the Dharmapala known as Mahakala in Sanskrit and Gonpo in Tibetan . Mahakala can be translated as the Great Destroyer, the Great Black-One, or the Great Time. He is regarded as either having been tamed by Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, or to be a fierce manifestation thereof. In addition to his role as protector, his wrathful qualities are also employed in the eradication of obstacles which a practitioner may have to deal with in seeking liberation.

Pieces such as this are known as "host of ornaments" (T. rgyan tshogs) or "material for the banquet" (T. Bskang rdsas) and are often kept in chapels specifically dedicated to the *dharmapalas* called *gonkang*. The image is composed of a variety of items considered to be "pleasing to the eyes of the deity" spread out in the space surrounding a central position where the attributes and attire of the deity are located. The deity itself is never shown because the picture serves as a meditative device whereby the practitioner merges his or her identity with that of the deity. That is, by mentally placing him or herself in the pictured attire, the practitioner acquires the powers of the deity in dealing with afflicted emotional or mental states.

The attire in the center includes a crown of five skulls (Skt. pancakapala) representing the five main afflictions of greed, envy, pride, anger, and ignorance transformed into the five wisdoms of ultimate reality, equalizing, discriminating, mirror, and all-accomplishing. A garland of fifty severed heads (Skt. mundamala) represents the conquered mental functions. The apron and variety of arm, wrist, and ankle bracelets, all being made of human bone, serve to reinforce a construct of symbols representing the overcoming of different obstructions and the death of the sense of self.

Immediately above this attire can be seen a *khyung*, a mythical bird which serves as Mahakala's messenger. While below is a person or corpse representing the ego, on which he treads. Mahakala's presence is emphasized through the central attributes of the chopper (Skt. karttika), club (T. beng, Skt. gada), and skull-cup (T. thod-pa, Skt. kapala) to the attire's immediate upper left. Immediately surrounding this central zone are animals associated with death or the charnel ground.

The multitude of items are arranged in a number of groupings which blend and overlap. Across the bottom, above the writing, can be seen offerings which are made to a wrathful deity (T. dragpoi tormo). Beginning at the bottom left corner can be seen animal skins and the five sense offerings, which are symbolically portrayed as the organs of the five senses in a skull cup. To the right of this is

an incense burner which would probably contain burning poisonous datura leaves and/or a black incense known as *gu gul*. The many skull cups scattered in this area contain either various bodily fluids or entrails or sacrificial cakes, known in Tibetan as *torma*.

The *torma* are made of different types of flour and water or milk to which alcohol, blood, pieces of meat, or some medicine may be added. These cakes, which have a stepping, pyramidal appearance, are specific to wrathful deities with their wavy outer lines representing smoke and flames. The color of these would probably match the color of the attending deity, in this case, black or a deep blue. In several locales across the print are cakes more representative of those made for peaceful deities (T. zhi bai torma). These often contain round shapes as can be seen in the example to the left of the large central *torma*. These are not inked in to the extent that the wrathful cakes are, further indicating their different nature. The same dough is also molded into images of men and animals (note the small man flanked by two elephants to the proper left of the larger central cake), as well as, armor and weapons further to the right.

The "layer" above these offerings consists of many different animals. These are animals whose body parts, such as claws, teeth, entrails, or skin, would be used in rites concerning the deity in question. Included here are dogs, mules, lions, and a yak to mention a few. The body parts of a variety of birds, including the raven, peacock, parrot, and falcon, may also be used. The number of birds also points to the importance of feathers used in such rites. Of interest is the *kimnara* playing cymbals between the large central dough sculpture and the dough armor. *Kimnaras* are celestial musicians which are half man and half bird. Above him and the peacock can be seen a horse with a thick mane and rich trappings. This is known as a *lung-ta* and is a being thought to control the weather.

Above the animals are weapons related to Mahakala, symbolizing aspects of his power to protect Buddhism, as well as to battle delusion. Included among them are a couple of *phur-pas*, ritual stakes used to subdue and subsequently enlist negative, uncontrolled, or otherwise wrathful powers. *Phur-pas* make reference to the Buddhist theme of self-control, and to the tantric employment of negative powers on the path to enlightenment. Although they may make reference to the binding and service of Mahakala, because he may wield them as well, their presence in this field probably counts them as part of his collection of weaponry. Other items attributed to Mahakala include:

- a variety of swords (T. rtse-mdun, Skt. khadga) which symbolize the ability to cut through delusion or obstacles, as such they represent wisdom, knowledge, or the protection given by Buddhist doctrine.
- standards and banners (Skt. dhvaja), which represent the victory of Buddhist teaching over delusion.
- an elephant goad (T. icags-kyu, Skt. ankusa), transformed here to the purpose of taming the energies of the ego.
- spears (T. mdun)
- a mallet or hammer (Skt. mudgara) and a club (Skt. gada), both symbolizing crushing strength or power.
- a bow (Skt. ripa) and several arrows (Skt. sara)
- a *vajra* staff (T. rdo-rgei, Skt. vajradanda)
- a trident (T. rtse-gsum, Skt. trisula), which is a piercing weapon like the spear- its three points also carrying connotations of the power of the three jewels.

- and a lasso (Skt. pasa) around a spear. The lasso having to do with the constraint of negative forces.

These items are often held by Mahakala in his many forms where he may have up to eighteen arms.

To the left of the central image are the Seven Jewels of Royal Power (T. rgyal-srid rin-chen sna-bdun, Skt. saptaratna) which are the accessories of the universal monarch (T. khor-los bsgyur-bai rgyal-po, Skt. chakravartin). They represent different abilities or aids that a king must possess in order to stay in power. In esoteric practice, these would be turned inward for use by the practitioner. Their meanings are transposed from applying to the *chakravartin* to the Buddha. In light of this their meanings become:

- The precious queen (T. btsun-mo, Skt. raniratna)- who completes the poles where the *chakravartin* is the masculine aspect, and she the feminine. Those working to abandon negative mental states regard her as mother or sister. Her beauty and love for her husband are representative of the radiating, piercing joy of the Buddha's enlightenment.
- The precious general (T. dmag-dpon rinpoche, Skt. senapatiratna) symbolizes the wrathful power to overcome enemies.
- The precious horse (T. rta-mchog rinpoche, Skt. asvaratna) serves as the *chakravartin's* personal mount and shares similarities with the *lung ta* referred to earlier, both in appearance and in the ability to travel among the clouds. Its qualities mirror the Buddha's abandonment of, or "rising above", the cares of worldly existence.
- The precious jewel (T. nor-bu rinpoche, Skt. maniratna), which is depicted on the back of the precious horse and separately in the upper left corner, deals with the themes of wealth and unfolding (power and possibility). The jewel is said to aid the *chakravartin* in his ability to see all things. In the same way, a Buddha can perceive all things; recognizing the manifold connections between all events, the relentless chain of cause and effect, and the nature of compounded existence.
- The precious minister or householder (T. blon-po rinpoche, Skt. parinayakaratra) represent two different aspects of the rule of the *chakravartin* which are closely related. The minister aids the *chakravartin* in carrying out his commands expeditiously, while the householder provides the very basic support, given with devotion, without which the *chakravartin* would be unable to rule.
- The knowledge of the Buddha, like the minister, is always present to him who has realized it, allowing him to cut through the bonds of ignorance. While the householder represents the support of the lay community, without which the monastic community could not continue. Each community playing its part, the lay providing physical sustenance, and the monastic, the sustenance of the Dharma.
- The precious elephant (T. glang-po rinpoche, Skt. hastiratna)- The elephant is a symbol of both strength and the untamed mind in Buddhism. The precious elephant represents the strength of one's mind tamed, through Buddhist practice. Exhibiting noble gentleness, the precious elephant serves as a symbol of the calm majesty possessed by one who is on the path. Specifically, he embodies the boundless powers of the Buddha which are miraculous aspiration, effort, intention, and analysis.
- The precious wheel (T. khor-lo rinpoche, Skt. chakraratna), which is depicted both on the back of the precious elephant and separately in the upper left corner below the precious jewel, is a

symbol of motion and power, representing the ability to "roll over" all obstacles. In Buddhism it symbolizes the truth and power of the noble path as realized and taught by the Buddha to deliver all from suffering. For just as the *chakravartin* has conquered the world, so the Buddha has overcome the defilements with the aid of the Dharma.

Above this group are different musical instruments including horns and trumpets made of human bone, cymbals, and drums, all of which would be involved in "calling" Mahakala to the offerings. Included among these is a *damaru* drum, one of Mahakala's attributes, to the upper left of the *khyung* bird. Mixed in with these are a group of items known as the "Eight Lucky Articles" or the "Eight Bringers of Good Fortune" (T. bKra-sis rdzas-brgyad, Skt. astamangaladravya). This group appears twice in this work in slightly different forms. The other group being to the proper left of the central image. All the items are given as offerings to support the practitioner's efforts at reaching enlightenment. Through being offered, the symbolism of each reinforces Buddhist teachings and ideals. The group consists of:

- The looking glass/mirror (T. me-long, Skt. adarsa), which represents the *dharmakaya* or Truth Body, having the aspects of purity (a mirror is clear of pollution) and wisdom (a mirror reflects all phenomena without distinction).
- Curd/Yogurt (T. zho, Skt. dadhi)- just as this highly valued food is the result of a long process, so the clear nature of mind is revealed with practice over time as the defilements are dissolved.
- Fine Green Grass/Durva Grass (T. rtsva dur-ba, Skt. durva)- durva grass is incredibly resilient and is a symbol of long life. This is considered beneficial because one needs time to practice and attain enlightenment.
- The Wood Apple/Bilva Fruit (T. shing-tog bil-ba, Skt. bilva)- is offered to remind the practitioner of the emptiness and conditioned nature of all phenomena in terms of dependent origination. Why the Bilva fruit was chosen to represent this is unknown.
- The Right-whorled Conch-shell (T. dung gyas khyil, Skt. daksinavartasankha)- represents the wish that the Buddhist teachings will be spread in all directions like the sounds emitted when the shell is used as a horn.
- Vermilion/Cinnabar (T. li-khri, Skt. sindura)- are each red powders consisting of mercuric sulfide. In tantric Buddhist color symbolism, red represents power. Thus, this offering is concerned with having control over one's capacities which are to be put to the effort of gaining enlightenment.
- White Mustard Seeds (T. yungs-kar, Skt. sarsapa)- are used in many rituals to expel demons. They therefore symbolize wrathful means at overcoming obstacles.
- Ghiwang Medicine or medicinal concretion from an elephant (T. ghi-wang, Skt. gorocana)- ghi-wang, literally meaning "cow essence", is a substance obtained from gallstones in cattle. It is considered to be soothing and strengthening. A substance with similar properties is obtained from elephants. Here, the substance's ability to deal with physical suffering is expanded in the symbol to include suffering in general, that is, the medicine of the Dharma.

In the region directly above and going off to the right of the central figure are a collection of *vajras* and a *vajra* bell, known in Sanskrit as a *vajraghanta*. These items would be used in ritual and meditation. Immediately above the *khyung* bird is a three-pointed *vajra* on its side along with the *vajraghanta*. Together, these items would be held by Mahakala in his sixteen-armed form, but may also be used by practitioners in ritual and meditation.

The bell, used since ancient times to warn away demons or call the gods to attention that someone is worshipping them, came, in the *vajraghanta* itself, to symbolize the union of male and female, or, compassion and wisdom respectively. Its sound serving either as a reminder of impermanence or the ability of wisdom to travel far and wide. The three prongs of the *vajra* represent the Buddha, wisdom, and compassion. To the right of the *vajraghanta* is a single-pointed vajra which represents the collapsing of the three prongs into one, that is, the Buddha, wisdom, and compassion are ultimately undifferentiated. Further right are two more three-pointed *vajras* with a pair of three-pointed *vajras* arranged as a cross (T. rgya gram, Skt. vishvavajra) between them.

Going across the top of the work are flayed human parts, including heads and entrails, hung in a sort of decorative motif. They serve as graphic symbols of the empty and transitory nature of our existence and the serious nature of the Buddhist endeavor.

To the upper right of the central figure, immediately right of the *khyung* bird is an offering of the "Seven Gems" (T. nor-bu bdun). Mixed in with these are the precious wheel with the precious jewel above it which go with the Seven Jewels of Royal Power. The Seven Gems include:

- the Three-Eyed Gem/Triple Gem (T. nor-bu bskor-cha)
- the Rhino or Unicorn's Horn (T. bse-ru)
- the Queen's Earrings (T. btsun-moi rna-cha)
- the Crossed Gems (T. nor-bu bskor-cha)
- the King's Earrings (T. rgyal-poi rna-cha)
- the Eight-Branched Corral (T. byu-ru yan-lag brgyad-pa)
- the Elephant's Tusks (T. glang-chen mche-ba)

The origins of these symbols seem to be in Chinese art, and no specific meaning is given to them in Tibet other than the understanding that they represent items of value. To the right of the corral can be seen the spinning triple gem (T. dga khyil) whose meaning is also unclear but shares similarities with the Taoist "yin-yang" symbol.

Below this group are the "Five Qualities of Enjoyment" (T. dod-yon sna-lnga, Skt. pancakamaguna). This collection represents characteristics which, when they come into contact with our senses, give rise to craving. They are:

- the Mirror (T. me-long, Skt. adarsa) for visual form.
- the Lute (T. pi-wang, Skt. vina) for sound.
- the Incense Burner (T. spos-snod)-a shell on its side with smoke rising out of it- for smell.
- the Fruit (T. shing-tog, Skt. phala) and Silk (T. dar, Skt. netra) which are possibly stacked together in the smudged image below the triple spinning gem and represent taste and touch respectively.

In offering these qualities, one would be meditating on their nature and expressing the intention of abandoning one's attraction to them.

The final group being offered is the "Eight Symbols of Good Fortune", or the "Eight Auspicious Symbols" (T. bkra-shis rtags-brgyad, Skt. astamangala) and is located to the left of the central figure and mixed in with another representation of the "Eight Bringers of Good Fortune". The eight Symbols

are:

- The (Glorious) Endless Knot (T. dpal beu, Skt. srivatsa), which is a symbol for the nature of reality where everything is inter-related and only exists as part of a web of cause and effect. The symbol at once expresses motion and rest and because it has no beginning or end it also represents the infinite knowledge of the Buddha.
- The Right-Turning Conch Shell (T. dung gyas khyil, Skt. daksinavartasankha) here, operating in both groups, has the same meaning as when present in the Eight Bringers of Good Fortune The Victory Sign (T. rgyal-mtshan, Skt. dhvaja) in form, is closely related to the parasol. It signifies the victory over hindrances or disharmony and the wish for abiding happiness.

(The remaining items are organized in a stack)

- The Wheel (T. khor-lo, Skt. cakra) represents the Buddha's first discourse, in which the wheel of the Dharma was set in motion. It can be divided into three parts, each representing an aspect of Buddhist practice; the hub (discipline), the spokes (wisdom), and the rim (concentration).
- The Treasure Vase (T. gter-chen-poi bum-pa, Skt. kalasa) shows similarities to the idea of the horn-of-plenty (Gk. cornucopia) and is a sign of the inexhaustible riches available in the Buddhist Doctrine.
- The Lotus (T. and Skt. padma) represents purity, for it rises out of the mud, above the surface of the water, to reveal a white blossom. Like the stem of the Lotus, the Buddhist teachings, when put into practice, raise the mind above the cares of worldly existence and give rise to purity of mind.
- The Golden Fishes (T. gser-nya, Skt. suvarnamatsya) were originally symbolic of the rivers Ganges and Yamuna, but came to represent good fortune in general, and have been carried over into Tibetan art with no additional meaning.
- The Parasol (T. gdugs, Skt. chattra) embodies notions of wealth or royalty, for one had to be rich enough to possess such an item, and further, to have someone carry it. It thus points to the "royal ease" and power experienced in the Buddhist life of detachment. Providing shade from the sun, it also serves as a symbol for the Dharma's ability to protect one from the "heat" of defilements.

With all these items spread before the deity, his presence and wrathful power are made manifest. For in the act of making such offerings, one reflects on the qualities contained therein and their attending effects. And through this process of reflection and identification, enlists the resulting power, personified in Mahakala, to overcome negative mental and emotional obstacles in one's own life.

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