

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Palden Lhamo (dpal ldan lha mo) in her "dpal ldan dmag zor rgyal mo" form*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

16.0 x 22.0 inches

Central Tibet

Ca. 18th century

Menri Serma style

Museum #: 91.001.018

By Natalie R. Marsh

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Like all emanations of this goddess, Palden Lhamo (T. dpal ldan lha mo) is represented in an angry (Skt. *krodha*) form in this 18th century, Central Tibetan example from the SAMA Rezk Collection. Her single face is framed by wild orange-brown, or reddish hair, above which an array of nine peacock feathers float.<sup>1</sup> She exhibits her ferocious teeth which gnaw on a human corpse while she strikes a fearful glare with her three blood-shot eyes. Palden Lhamo's body is covered with ashes, fat, and blood and surrounded by a halo of flame as is appropriate to her visualized presence in a charnel field. According to textual sources, and evident upon very close examination, in her raised right hand this dark-blue form of the deity brandishes a sandalwood club topped with a *vajra*. With this weapon the goddess watches over the oath-bound, insuring their allegiance and integrity in upholding the Buddhist Dharma. The presence of a lion at her proper right ear and a snake at her proper left ear serves to verify that this example is the dPal ldan dmag zor rgyal mo form of the goddess. In her left hand, raised to her chest, she carries the blood-filled skull of a child born out of an incestuous union. She is shown in a seated position riding on the back of a *khyang*, an untrainable wild mule, whose head is usually turned back toward the goddess, acknowledging Palden Lhamo's loud and fearful shrieks said to resemble thunder. On the goddess's navel is a small sun disk and above her head a crescent moon. She is generally shown wearing a black silk scarf that blows around and behind her, along with a human skin that is worn as a shawl. Her upper garment is made of black fabric and her lower garment consists of a tiger skin secured by a belt of intertwined snakes. She wears a long necklace of freshly severed human heads, the five skull crown, and the other five bone ornaments of many Heruka class deities, here most recognizably depicted around the goddess's wrists and ankles. These carved human bone ornaments represent the necessary release of attachment to one's physical existence; and the six perfections, or *paramitas*, required in the process of attaining enlightenment. The reins of her mule, which wrap around her saddle of human skin, are also made of venomous snakes. Threaded on additional snakes and dangling from her mount are a black and white pair of dice used to determine karmic fate, and a magic ball of string made of rolled up weapons. A red tablet used to conjure spells is tied to her mount or tucked into her belt, along with a sack full of diseases, said to have been collected by the goddess and dispensed when evil has been committed.<sup>2</sup> On her mule's hind quarter is a single eye, which formed from the wound left by an arrow shot by Palden Lhamo's former husband, the Cannibal King of Sri Lanka. After failing to convince her people of their evil cannibalistic practices, the goddess followed through with her vow to kill her son. Seated on the

saddle made of her son's skin, the Cannibal King shot at his wife as she galloped away, striking her mount instead. 3

Below the main goddess are two figures, the animal-headed female attendants, Chu srin gdong can and Seng ge'i gdong can, who, by their presence, further confirm that this is the above stated form of the goddess. Chu srin gdong can, the "makara-headed" dakini to Palden Lhamo's right, is dark blue in color and dressed in a human skin. She holds the reins of Palden Lhamo's mule in her left hand and a snare, or noose, in her right hand. Seng ge'i gdong can, the "lion-headed" dakini placed to the left of the central deity, is red in color and holds a noose, and the kapala, or skull cup. According to textual sources this figure should hold the *kartrika*, or flaying knife, in place of the noose, though this type of variation in attributes is not uncommon. As members within a retinue that make up one of Palden Lhamo's mandalas these two figures emerge out of the syllable "bhyo," part of the goddess's mantra.

Palden Lhamo is a complex figure said to function as the "chief guardian goddess" of the dharmapalas, or protectors, of the Tibetan Buddhist religion.<sup>4</sup> The eight primary dharmapalas include Palden Lhamo, the only female deity of the group; Yama, the God of Death (T. gShin rje); Mahakala, (T. mGo po or Nag po chen po); Vaishravana, also known as Jambhala or Kubera (T. rNam thos sras); Begste, (T. Beg ste or lCam sring); Sita-Brahma (T. Tshangs pa dkar po); Hayagriva (T. rTa mgrin); and Yamantaka, sometimes identified as Vajrabhairava (T. gShin rje gshed). The dharmapalas are generally understood to have been the native deities of Tibet who initially resisted conversion to Buddhism when the foreign religion was introduced at the request of the king, Trisong Detsen, in the late 8th century CE. Shantarakshita, the Indian teacher given the responsibility of propagating the religion, was unable to bring the native deities under control, and thus, incapable of building a stable Buddhist community in Tibet. For this reason he called upon Padmasambhava, a great Tantrin from India, to come to his aid. Padmasambhava was successful in this venture and became the true founder of Tibetan Buddhism, through which his teachings are kept alive.

Within the Buddhist context, Palden Lhamo may also be a form of Mahakala, and thus a distant form of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion. She is frequently depicted amongst a retinue of Mahakala forms. (See [# 92.002A](#) and [#94.006](#)) As one who has the ability to take any number of forms in order to aid sentient beings in their path to enlightenment, Palden Lhamo may be considered a *mahasattva bodhisattva*, or a transformative deity. Other forms which Palden Lhamo take number at least eleven, and include various forms of Remati and Ekajati. In addition, the goddess is frequently accompanied by numerous subsidiary deities and attendants, many of whom function as aspects within several of her known mandalas. A possible example of one of these figures is present in the SAMA collection, [# 97.075](#), Object # 66.

Images of Palden Lhamo frequently indicate her function as a personal deity, or *ishtadevata*; "selected-god." In this role, she is depicted in the lower registers or to the sides of primary figures in paintings and sculpture. One's *ishtadevatas* are selected by his or her guru, and are to be consulted throughout one's entire life. They guide, protect, and focus specific energies of the practitioner in his or her pursuit of enlightenment.

There are several versions recounting Palden Lhamo's complex and interwoven history, though many seem to be forced rationalizations and recontextualizations for the goddess's current role in Tibetan Buddhism. Such is the process of assimilation and the likely reason behind her complexity. For

instance, aside from her position as a leading *dharmapala*, she is also said to be a Hindu deity that was assimilated into the Tibetan pantheon at an early date. She is thought to be related to Kali, and also has been linked to the personas of Tara and Sarasvati.<sup>5</sup> Her name translated in Sanskrit is Shri-devi, meaning "great and beautiful goddess of welfare." Palden Lhamo's current characterization may best be described as a composite of mystical personifications going back to very early practices and understandings of the Tibetan people, layered with imported Hindu goddess identities and Buddhist identities created to correspond to the Dharma.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of Palden Lhamo's homeland, her ancient roots may go back as far as the period of goddess worship prior to the development of Hinduism or Buddhism. In all periods, however, her great power lies in her dual creative and destructive capacity, a quality that is clearly displayed in her iconography, evident in her lore, and harnessed by Buddhist proponents.

This painting does not suggest an affiliation with a particular sect of Tibetan Buddhism, though the goddess is most popularly worshipped among the Gelugpa. She has been the protector of the Dalai Lamas since becoming the special protector of the First Dalai Lama, Je Gedhun Drub (1391-1474) after having guided him to the site of the monastery he was to found.<sup>7</sup> Palden Lhamo is also well-known and recognized by the Nyingmapa and the Bon religion native to Tibet. Furthermore, Palden Lhamo also became the primary protective deity of Lhasa and the entire country of Tibet, and was propitiated during annual ceremonies in order to retain her powerful guard and beneficence.

1 Iconographic identification is based on the following: Tucci, 591-591, Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 24-29, and Rhie and Thurman, 301.

2 Rhie and Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion*, 301.

3 Rhie and Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion*, 301.

4 Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 23.

5 Rhie and Thurman, 301

6 Several histories are traced in *The Guardian Deities of Tibet* by Ladrang Kalsang, 1996. 7 Kalsang, 26.

#### References:

*The Guardian Deities of Tibet*, Ladrang Kalsang, 1996.

*Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, Giuseppe Tucci, 1949.

*Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, Rene Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1993.

*Wisdom and Compassion*, Marilyn Rhie and Robert Thurman, 1993.

## The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism, A. Gordon, 1939

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