

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Refuge Field of Padmasambhava*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

Ca. 18th or 19th century

Museum #: 97.267

By Ariana P. Maki

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Each day, a Buddhist devotee takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, to remind him or her of the purity of the teachings and the route of their transmission. Tantras which explain how to take refuge are very explicit: the guru is identical to the Buddha, and subsequently, all Buddhas. The guru is the link between Buddhas and the student, and confers the teachings necessary to progress towards enlightenment.

The devotee envisions a large lotus bloom emerging from a lake, populated by an assembly of deities. Padmasambhava, the head of the Nyingma lineage, is located in the center as a paired deity with his primary consort Yeshe Tsogyal. They are surrounded by books, which represent not only the many texts that Padmasambhava had translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit, but also the terma teachings that he and Yeshe Tsogyal sealed throughout Tibet. In his left hand, Padmasambhava holds a kapala, or skull drum, filled with white flowers. The three points of the trident on the khatvanga, or monk's staff, leaning against his left shoulder symbolize entity, nature and compassion. The three heads beneath symbolize the three realms, as well as the three stages, which are human, bodhisattva, and Buddha. Padmasambhava holds a vajra in his right hand, representing the adamant nature of absolute truth, and his upraised right index finger signifies that he has subdued all the elements.

Padmasambhava wears a special hat with many levels of interpretation. It consists of two layers, symbolizing the generation and completion of Tantric practice, and is arranged in five colors, which signify the five bodies: Nature, Wisdom, Enjoyment, Emanation, and Immutable Vajra Bodies. Above his head are the sun and moon, which represent wisdom and skillful means, joining together to form enlightenment. Also on his hat are an eagle's feather and vajra ornament.

Above Padmasambhava is the transmission lineage of teachers. Centrally located at the top of the middle row is the Adi Buddha Samantabhadra as a paired deity with Samantabhadri, and directly below him is Vajrasattva. The refuge tantra also names Garap Dorje, the teacher Manjusrimitra, Shrisimha, and Jnanasutra, and personal lamas as being present.

Flanking Padmasambhava are a field of bodhisattvas on the left, symbolizing compassion, and a corresponding assembly of monks on the right, who represent wisdom. These two ideals, wisdom and compassion, conflate centrally in the figure of Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyal as the embodiment of enlightenment.

On the far left of the top row of deities beneath Padmasambhava is standing Sadakshari Avalokiteshvara. He is followed by the five jina, or victor, Buddhas with their respective prajnas.

From left to right, Buddha Ratnasambhava is paired with Mamaki, Buddha Aksobhya in union with Locana, Buddha Vairocana with Prajnaparamita, Buddha Amitabha with Pandura, and Buddha Amogasiddhi is paired with Shymatara. An unidentifiable red dakini finishes out the first row of figures.

The second from the top row begins with Guru Drakpo, a fierce form of Padmasambhava, followed by five herukas on lotuses. The condition of the painting makes discernment of the heruka's attributes very difficult, and any positive identification is speculative. Simhamukha, the lion-faced dakini, is depicted at the far right of the second row.

The next row contains the five jina Buddhas with their prajnas, standing on lotuses in a dancing posture. Seen from left to right are Buddha Aksobhya, Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Ratnasambhava, Buddha Amogasiddhi, and Buddha Vairocana. Centrally depicted are the Buddhas of the three times, Amitabha as the Buddha of the past, Shakyamuni as the Buddha of the present, and Miatreya as the Buddha of the future. On the right of these three Buddhas is a series of five dakinis wearing human skins.

The row nearest the edge of the main field contains a series of protectors of the Nyingma sect. These figures are difficult to identify due to the condition of the painting. An unidentified bodhisattva holds a parasol on the far right side. To the left of the lotus stalk is Rahu, a Nyingma protector, contained within a triangular iron jail. He is half serpent, and his entire body is covered with eyes. A dam-can, or vow-bound deity, rides a white lion on the other side of the stalk.

All figures present in the field are to be imagined as active, offering their energy and strength to the practitioner as he or she takes refuge. In the meditation process, all the deities dissolve into Padmasambhava, who in turn dissolves into your personal guru, who then dissolves into the meditator. The meditator then achieves an equivalent identity with all the figures of the refuge field, and has all the strengths therein.

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