

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***The Third Karmapa Lama, Rang Jung Dorje (T: Rang 'Byung rDo rJe)*** [\(Image\)](#)

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in water based (collagen) binder

15.5 x 22.5 inches

Southeastern Tibet?

Ca. 17th century

Museum #: 92.048

By Tom Suchan

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The third Karmapa lama Rang Jung Dorje (1284-1338) whose name translates as "Self-Arisen Vajra" was one of most influential of the lineage of seventeen Karmapa lamas. The Karmapa lamas are the spiritual leaders of a branch of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism that was established by Dusum Khyenpa (1110-1193) and based in Tsurphu monastery fifty miles west of Lhasa. The Karmapas are considered to be one of the earliest line of tulku (T: sPrul-sKu) "reincarnate lamas" in Tibet. Their representations in art can be easily identified by their distinctive black hat (T. Shwa-nag) which was a gift from a Mongol prince to the second Karmapa Lama, Karmapakshi, and held to represent a metaphysical hat made of the hairs of a myriad of Dakinis.

The first several Karmapas are distinguished by their important status at the Yuan and Ming courts of China where they served as the spiritual guides to princes and emperors. Their influence also extended to the court of the Tangut Xia Kingdom where a disciple of Dusum Khyenpa was given the title "Supreme Teacher" by a Tangut Xixia King (Thurman, 236). Rang Jung Dorje made two trips to the Yuan court and oversaw the enthronement of the last Yuan Emperor, Toghon Temur (1333-70). Besides his activities at the Yuan court, Rang Jung Dorje is equally famous for his scholarship. The astrological almanac he formulated, called the Tsurphu system, is considered a classic text on astrology in Tibet. Rang Jung Dorje is also noted for being a student of the Nyingthig (Skt: cittatilaka) "Heart-Essence" teachings of the Nyingma "old school" of Tibetan Buddhism. The Nyingthig teachings are an important class of teachings within the esoteric instructional class of Atiyoga or Dzogchen "the Great Perfection", the highest order of Nyingma teachings that were transmitted to Tibet separately by Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra (Dudjam Rinpoche, 569). Rang Jung Dorje was instructed in the Nyingthig teachings of Vimalmitra by the Nyingma teacher Kumaradza (Roerich, 199).

In the painting, other members of that lineage are represented. The small figure who holds a book (Skt. Pustaka), located above and to the proper right of Rang Jung Dorje, can be identified as Lo Chen Chos dPal, a contemporary of Rang Jung Dorje and famous Nyingma historian. Lo Chen Chos dPal was both a disciple of Kumaradza and Rang Jung Dorje, and is considered the primary integrator of the Nyingthig teachings of Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava. Opposite Lo Chen Chos dPal is another important Nyingma teacher, Lharje Zurpoche who is shown holding a vajra and ghunta crossed in front of his chest. The two lower figures to the sides of Rang Jung Dorje may represent his two main disciples, the first Sharmapa "red hat" lama Khaydrup Dragpa Senge and Gyalwa Yanggton Dorje Pal.

Above Rang Jung Dorje are three figures representing the three bodies of the lotus family (Skt: kula). Directly above Rang Jung Dorje is Amitabha, the Buddha of this era and the Buddha progenitor of the figures below him. Below to his proper left is his nirmanakaya manifestation as Padmasambhava, the founder of the Nyingma school and the primary source of the Nyingthig teachings. Opposite Padmasambhava is a seated image of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara who holds a lotus. The Karmapas are held to be incarnations of Sadaksari Avalokitesvara.

At the bottom of the painting three protective deities are represented. In the center is a two armed form of Mahakala who wears a black robe. This form of Mahakala, called Vajra Black Cloaked Mahakala (T: mGon po rdo rje ber nag can) is the principle Dharmapala of the Karmapas (Thinley, 33). Opposite in the right corner is another important protective deity (T: dam can) of the Karmapa sect, called Garba Nagpo, "the black-hued blacksmith" who sits on a billy-goat with crossed horns and holds a tiger skin bellows and a vajra hammer. Opposite Garba Nagpo is a four-armed form of Penden Lhamo seated on a Kyang, a type of wild Tibetan ass. Like Garba Nagpo, she holds a vajra-hammer in her raised right hand. Among the eight great protective deities of Tibetan Buddhism, Penden Lhamo is the only female. She is one of the most important protective deities in Tibet, especially for the Gelugpas, and is often shown in the retinue of Mahakala.

The painting is done in the Karma gadri style. This style, which originated in Kham (Eastern Tibet) is associated with the Karmapa tradition, is characterized by its use of vibrant greens and blues derived from Ming Dynasty court art. The hilly background landscape with a central hill placed behind the central figure is a standard compositional device used in many Karma gadri style paintings and may in part be inspired by the grassy plateaus of the Kham region.

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