

# Notes on the Iconography and Iconology of the Paro Tsechu Festival Giant *Thang-ka*

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In the Paro *thang-ka*, the large triad of Padmasambhava flanked by his two consorts and with a miniature Amitābha Buddha above his halo occupies the central position (see p. 46, Fig. 1 and diagram, p. 51). In the background field are twelve secondary figures arranged symmetrically around the central group. On the top row on either side of the central figure are Uṣṇīṣavijayā, 'Queen of the Victory of the Uṣṇīṣa', and Avalokiteśvara, of whom Padmasambhava is regarded as an incarnation. Two Bhutanese Buddhist figures are depicted on the bottom row and the eight incarnations and manifestations of Padmasambhava, including the historical monk, are along the left and right borders.

The seated figure of Padmasambhava (Fig. 1) is garbed in flowing robes. Of intense demeanour, the features in the white face (Fig. 1a) are outlined by a thin black line or by blue for the eyebrows and moustache. Touches of red model the mouth and the outside corners of the eyes. Padmasambhava's cap is shaped and

adorned in the characteristic manner, with lappets upturned and a mantric syllable 'hri' in the centre near the forehead. Above this syllable is a combined sun and crescent moon and finally a crown topped with peacock feathers (Sk. *mayūrapiccha*). The lobes of the *guru's* ears are elongated by heavy circular earrings. In his right hand he holds a *vajra* (Tb. *rdo-rje*, commonly mis-translated as either 'thunderbolt' or 'diamond'), which in Tibetan Buddhist practice is a complex symbol for the ultimate compassion of the Buddhist teachings, demonstrated by all teachers through their teachings. His left hand (Fig. 1b) holds the *kapāla* (Tb. *thod-phor*), a cup made from the cranium of a human skull holding the five offerings of *amṛta* (Tb. *bDud-rtsi*, 'nectar'). Resting in the *kapāla* is also a *tse-'bum* (vase of life), a meditational device out of which the deities are seen to emerge as if on a cloud. In the crook of his left elbow rests a *khaṭvāṅga* (Tb. *Kha-tvam-ga*) or ceremonial staff (Fig. 1c), consisting of trident (Sk. *triśula*; Tb.

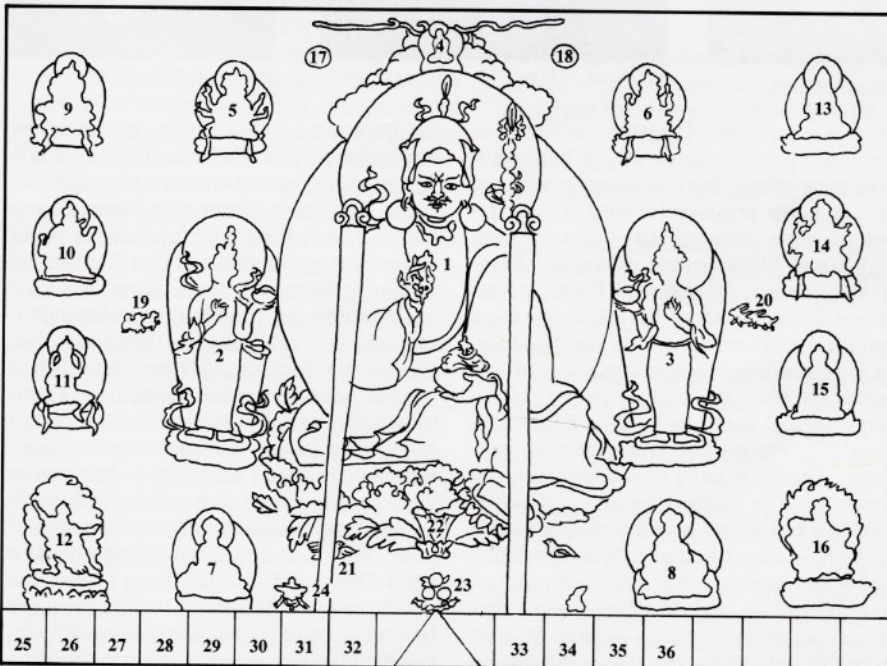
*rTse-gsum*) points, a skull, a long dead severed head, a freshly severed head and a *pūrṇaḥaṭa* (vase of plenty) all resting on a *viśvavajra* (Tb. *rdo-rje rGya-gram*, universal *vajra*). In the bKa'-rgyud-pa tradition, the severed heads are from persons who personify aversion, attachment and confusion. The vase of plenty is understood as the source of the teachings; the *vajra* and the trident represent the 'Ultimate Universality' and the knowledge necessary to attain it. Surrounding the figure of Padmasambhava are a halo and a mandorla with multi-coloured *prabhā* (radiance) emanating from the sides. He is portrayed as one who has achieved buddhahood, presiding over his paradise located on sacred copper-coloured mountains surrounding a lake.

Flanking the central figure of Padmasambhava are his two consorts (Sk. *dākiṇī*; Tb. *mKha'-'grol*; Figs 2 and 3), usually identified as the Indian princess Mandārāvā and the Tibetan noble woman Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal (also known as Ye-shes mKha'-'gro-ma or Jñāna Dākiṇī). However, in Bhutan there is another tradition that may account for the identification of one of them. During Guru Rinpoche's (Guru Padmasambhava, see below) visit to Tibet, the great teacher went to Bhutan and converted one of the early kings of Bhutan known in literature as the Sindhu *rāja*. The legend relates how the king was so deeply moved by the teachings that he renounced all his possessions and how he gave his beautiful daughter, Mönmo Tashi Khanda (Tb. Mon-mo bKra-shis Khan-'Bras) to Guru Rinpoche as a consort. Mönmo, in her turn, became a major teacher of Tantric practice in the Bhutanese region. Only a very knowledgeable local informant could verify the proper tradition as to the identity of the figures as no distinctive identifying attributes are given for any of the three women.

Directly above Padmasambhava's head is a small figure of Amitābha Buddha (Tb. 'Od-dpag-med, pronounced Öpagme; see p. 46, Fig. 1 and no. 4 on the diagram), identifiable by his orange-red colour, his meditation posture, the *dhyāna-mudrā* and the bowl held in his hands. In this context, he is the lord of Sukhāvātī (Tb. bDe-ba-can), the land of bliss to which faithful Buddhists may go at the time of their death.

At the mid-left of the top row of figures on the *thang-ka* is an image of Uṣṇīṣavijayā (Tb. gTsub-tor rNam-par-rgyal-ma, pronounced Tsug-tor nampar gyelma; Fig. 5), commonly known in Tibetan as rNam rGyal-ma (pronounced Namgyelma, 'Queen

Diagram of the Paro Tsechu Festival *thang-ka*



- |                                |                                      |                                    |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Padmasambhava               | 13. Guru Padsambhava                 | 25. <i>Viśvavajra</i>              |
| 2. Consort of Padmasambhava    | 14. Guru Padma rGyal-po              | 26. Wheel of the Law               |
| 3. Consort of Padmasambhava    | 15. Guru Śakya Seng-ge               | 27. 'Endless knot'                 |
| 4. Amitābha Buddha             | 16. Guru rDo-rje gro-lod             | 28. Banner                         |
| 5. Uṣṇīṣavijaya                | 17. Sun                              | 29. Vase of <i>maṇi</i> gems       |
| 6. Avalokiteśvara              | 18. Moon                             | 30. Lotus                          |
| 7. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal   | 19. Snow lions                       | 31. White conch                    |
| 8. Tenzin Rabgye               | 20. White rabbits                    | 32. Twin golden fish               |
| 9. Guru U-rgyan rDo-rje 'chang | 21. <i>Haṁsa</i> (goose)             | 33. Vase containing <i>Gi-yang</i> |
| 10. Guru Blo-ldan mchog-sred   | 22. Base of lotus                    | 34. Mendicant's bowl               |
| 11. Guru Nyi-ma 'od-zer        | 23. 'Five sense-stimulating objects' | 35. <i>Kuśa</i> grass              |
| 12. Guru Seng-ge sgra-sgrogs   | 24. Parasol                          | 36. Peaches                        |



1. Padmasambhava and, above him, 4. Amitābha Buddha



1b. Detail of Figure 1



1a. Detail of Figure 1



1c. Detail of Figure 1

of Victory'). The version of her depicted in the *thang-ka* has eight arms; the two principal ones hold a *viśvavajra* in a permutation of a teaching gesture (Sk. *dharmacakra-mudrā*). Her proper upper right arm (to the viewer's left) holds an image of a Buddha; the middle right arm holds an arrow (Sk. *sara*; Tb. *mDa*); while the lower right arm makes the *varada-mudrā* (Tb. *mChog-sByina Phyang-rgya*) symbolizing the 'bestowal of gifts' but implying the gift of the *Dharma* to the monks so that they may attain advancement. Her upper left hand is in *abhaya-mudrā* (Tb. *Jigs-med Phyang-rgya*) which symbolizes the absence of fear by means of the teachings. The middle left hand holds the bow (Sk. *cāpa*; Tb. *gZhu*) matching the arrow in the counterpart right hand. The lower left hand in her lap holds the vase of the nectar of eternal life.

Opposite *Uṣṇīsavijayā*, to the viewer's right is Avalokiteśvara (Tb. *sPyan-ras-gzigs*, pronounced *Chenraszig*; Fig. 6). Although it is not widely known in the Tibeto-Bhutanese sphere, by world Buddhist standards this is a fairly specialized form of Avalokiteśvara known as *Ṣaḍakṣarī* Avalokiteśvara, ('Six syllable Avalokiteśvara'), who is specifically the personification of the famous *mantra* 'Om-

*maṇi-padme hūm*'. Devotion to him is so common, virtually universal, in the Tibeto-Bhutanese sphere that it is naturally assumed that he is the primary form of Avalokiteśvara, even though in India, China and Japan other forms, especially Ārya-Avalokiteśvara, fill that role. Both the Karma-pa Lama, head of the *bKa'-rgyud-pa* and the Dalai Lama, head of the *dGe-lugs-pa* are considered to be emanations of this particular form of Avalokiteśvara. In his two principal hands he holds a 'Cintāmaṇi Gem' (Tb. *ma-ṅi*), the symbol of enlightenment. This is usually obscured from the viewer by the cupped hands as a secret attribute but in this case it is clearly visible as the blue object between the hands. Most frequently, it is said the figure of *Ṣaḍakṣarī* Avalokiteśvara makes *aṅjali-mudrā* (the gesture of devotion) but, as may be seen from this representation, that is not always the case.

At the bottom mid-left is depicted Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Tb. *Zhabs-drung Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal*, 1594-1651; Fig. 7) who was born in Tibet and who came to Bhutan in 1616. He arrived from Duk Sangga Chöling (Tb. 'Brug gSang-sngags Chos-gling), a Dukpa (Tb. 'Brug-pa) monastery. The Dukpa are a branch of the Kagyupa (Tb. *bKa'-rgyud-pa*) held by

the Bhutanese to have been revitalized by Padmakarpo (Tb. *Pad-ma dKar-po*; 1527-92) who is popularly known by his spiritual name, Ngawang Norbu (Tb. *Ngag-dbang Nor-bu*). It is following rules of the order and of lineage successions that Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the leading successor to Padmakarpo, founded the independent kingdom of Duk yul (Tb. 'Brug-yul), i.e. Bhutan, as Zhabdrung I and established several monasteries. His royal lineage continued through eleven incarnations, up to 1905, after which no more incarnations were recognized. These rulers were seen as both Tantric priests and rulers (*Dharmarājas*) and old accounts of these kings tell of their compassion and humility as befits a great *Dharmarāja*. Zhabdrung I holds the *tse-'bum* in his left hand, his right raised in *vitarka-mudrā* (Tb. *Chos-sByin Phyang-rgya*). The *vitarka* gesture, symbolizing discourse or discussion of the *Dharma* is probably a reference to his powers of speech (literally the *Ngag-dbang* component of his name) but is curiously not a characteristic of his more commonly met with iconography. His beard and the *tse-'bum*, although not invariably present, actually are more the determining characteristics.

His counterpart at the bottom mid-right

is Tenzin Rabgye (Tb. bsTan-'dzin Rabgyas, 1638-96; Fig. 8), 4th Duk Desi (Tb. 'Brug sDe-srid, regent of temporal rule under the Zhabdrung; r. 1680-95) of Bhutan who is credited as the builder of Paro's Tiger's Den monastery (Tb. sPa-gro sTag mtshang, pronounced Paro Takshang) and who is also recognized as one of the great religious/secular leaders of Bhutan. He is shown in similar posture and dress to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, and although he carries a book in his left hand, it is not necessarily a characteristic attribute. The presence of these two figures in the *thang-ka* is undoubtedly a reference to the legitimacy of the Dukpa school of Kagyupa as the state religion in Bhutan and to the legitimacy of the present government through the Zhabdrung lineage.

The other eight figures, four at each side of the *thang-ka*, are the incarnations and manifestations of Padmasambhava. At the viewer's left they are, from top to bottom, the incarnation as Guru U-rgyan rDo-rje 'chang (Fig. 9), the primordial or Ādi-Buddha, the first manifestation of Guru Padmasambhava; below him is Guru Blo-dan mchog-sred (Fig. 10), the fifth manifestation; while below him is Guru Nyi-ma 'od-zer (Fig. 11), the sixth manifestation; at the bottom is Guru Seng-ge sgra-sgrogs (Fig. 12), the eighth manifestation. Down the right side of the *thang-ka* are Guru Padmasambhava (Fig. 13), the fourth manifestation of Padmasambhava; Guru Padma rGyal-po (Fig. 14), the third incarnation of Padmasambhava; below that is Guru Śākya Seng-ge (Fig. 15), the second incarnation; while the group of eight is completed by Guru rDo-rje gro-lod (Fig. 16), the seventh manifestation.

Taking them in order of their appearance, or incarnation, each has a didactic purpose and often a special message to a particular constituency. In his first incarnation, it is as the Ādi-Buddha rDo-rje 'chang (Sk. Vajradhara, 'Bearer of the *Vajra*'; Fig. 9) that Padmasambhava expresses the *Dharmakāyā* (Fig. 17) (literally 'the Being of the Law'), demonstrating the experiential union of skilful means and compassion (Sk. *upāya* and *karuṇa*, respectively) with transcendent wisdom and 'voidness' (Sk. *prajñā* and *sūnyatā*, respectively) into the highest final enlightenment (Sk. *saṃyaksambodhi*). It is the ultimate duality of all apparent ones and as such is termed *yuganaddha* (joined together), or *yab-yum* in Tibetan (literally 'father-mother'). The symbolic sexual intercourse of Padmasambhava as rDo-rje 'chang and his *prajñā* (the personification of *prajñā* as the female partner) symbolizes the most profound level of attainment in Buddhist soteriological methodology.

Iconologically, rDo-rje 'chang is the source, appropriately called the 'revealer' of all Buddhist texts, however, the form is also known as Padma-gSol-ba and is said in the *Padma Than-yig* to have been the

body that Padmasambhava assumed when he received the teachings of Mahayoga directly from Vajrasattva (Tb. rDo-rje Sems-pa). In either case, the form of Guru U-rgyan rDo-rje 'chang is a demonstration of Padmasambhava's attainment and of his legitimacy as a teacher of the most profound doctrines. Usually the U-rgyan component of his name is said to refer to the district of U-rgyan in Tibetan geography or Uḍḍiyāna (widely assumed to have been what is now known as Swat valley above the Peshawar valley in modern Pakistan).

In his second incarnation, Padmasambhava was aware of the needs of mankind and incarnated as Guru Śākya Seng-ge (Sk. Śākyasiṃha, one of the epithets of Śākyamuni Buddha). In this form (Fig. 15), he prepared himself for his future mission by studying astrology, medicine, 360 languages and sixty-four kinds of writing, the arts and crafts. In short, he perfected all *vidya*, literally 'lore' or factual knowledge. He then learned *yogatantra* from the *yogin* Prabhati, and from Ānanda, the Buddha Śākyamuni's disciple and master of all teachings, he learned the three teachings of the *Dharma*. In this incarnation, Padmasambhava is identified with Śākyamuni Buddha, not as him but as a second generation recipient of his teachings. In this way his authority is unquestioned and unquestionable since he too is a buddha. Frontal representations of Guru Śākya Seng-ge, such as is seen in the *thang-ka*, are indistinguishable from that of Śākyamuni Buddha and may be identified only from context or by inscriptions. The more common type of representation is with the figure turned slightly to his right, and he usually carries a *vajra* in his right hand, rather than making *bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā* ('earth-touching gesture'). It is important to note this variation in the convention and to be aware that it may be a local Bhutanese convention. Only further investigation into the iconography of Śākya Seng-ge will determine this.

The third incarnation of Padmasambhava is as Guru Padma rGyal-po (Fig. 14), who was the miraculous born son of King Indrabhūti (the great Indian *mahāsiddha* and teacher of several *tantras*, e.g. *Śrīcakrasambhara* and *Vajrayoginī*) of Uḍḍiyāna. When Indrabhūti Rāja prayed for a son, Guru Padmasambhava was born on a lotus in the middle of lake Dhanakoṣa. Named mTsho kyi rDo-rje, this youth led a somewhat turbulent existence in the kingdom of his adopted father and turned his thoughts to renunciation of worldly pleasures.

Padmasambhava's fourth manifestation is as Guru Padmasambhava, the monk and tantric master (Fig. 13). It is as Guru Padmasambhava that Padmasambhava is considered a transformation existence (Sk. *nirmāṇakāya*) emanation of Vajrasattva and the first human founder of the Vidyadhara lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

In the *thang-ka*, he is shown as an eastern Indian monk with a Bengali *paṇḍita's* hat and holding a *za ma-tog* (container for texts, or, according to another tradition, tantric implements; both are characteristic of Indian saints) in his right hand. More commonly the representations of Guru Padmasambhava as part of the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava show the *za ma-tog* behind him and a *kapāla* with offerings overflowing in his right hand. As with the images of Śākya Seng-ge (see above) the question arises as to whether this is a local iconographical variance or not; only future study will tell.

Guru Blo-dan mchog-sred (Fig. 10) is Padmasambhava as he manifested himself while living for five years a *yogin's* life in the great charnal fields near Sīmhapura in Kashmir. (These are fields where Buddhists expose their dead to be consumed by wild animals as the ultimate offering of the body to one's fellow creatures. They are frightening and dangerous places especially since the animals do not always distinguish between a corpse to be consumed and a *yogin* in meditation.) In this form, Padmasambhava demonstrated his total compassion for even the lowest of evil beings, yet notwithstanding the best efforts of the great *yogin*, the evil beings could not be saved. The figure then represents the need for all beings to take part in their own salvation.

At the end of a tantric meditation in which he attained such mastery that he could receive initiations directly from the Ādi-Buddha, Samantabhadra (according to the rNying-ma-pa tradition), Padmasambhava attained the name Guru Nyi-ma 'od-zer (Fig. 11). Depicted with a *khaṭvāṅga*, he points to the sun or, in some cases as it is here, seems to control the sun on a string much like a kite. The image is an expression of his tantric attainments and his attainment of the *siddhis* (powers) characteristic of the fully advanced practitioners.

Guru rDo-rje gro-lod (Fig. 16), the seventh manifestation, is Padmasambhava's wrathful or angry form in which he converts all evil beings into protectors of the faith — *yi-dam* ('vow bound'). In most representations, he crushes underfoot a being who represents ego (Sk. Rudra) and prepares to pin demons and evil beings to the ground by means of his *phur-pa* (Sk. *vajrakila*, ritual dagger) that he carries in his left hand. Wrathful forms such as both this and the next, Seng-ge sgra-sgrogs (Fig. 12), are seen not as evil or demonic forces but the power with which one combats evil or demonic forces on their own terms. Thus, they are the energy of the *yogin*, in this case Padmasambhava, that is to be directed at negative factors. According to Bhutanese informants, this form is particularly associated with the Paro Tiger's Den monastery, where it is believed that Buddhism in Bhutan was founded by rDo-



2. Consort of Padmasambhava



6. Avalokiteśvara



9. Guru U-rgyan rDo-rje 'chang



3. Consort of Padmasambhava



7. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal



10. Guru Blo-ldan mchog-sred



5. Uṣṇīṣavijayā



8. Tenzin Rabgye



11. Guru Nyi-ma 'od-zer



12. Guru Seng-ge sgra-sgrogs



15. Guru Śākya Seng-ge



13. Guru Padmasambhava



16. Guru rDo-rje gro-lod



14. Guru Padma rGyal-po

rje gro-lod who flew there on the back of the tigress on which he is depicted standing.

Although it is difficult to separate Guru Seng-ge sgra-sgrogs from Vajrapāṇi (Tb. rDo-rje phyag-na), the context of a *thangka* with the other seven forms of Padmasambhava alone demands the identification. It is fitting that the two are virtually identical in that it was Vajrapāṇi who offered the *Anuyoga Tantras* to Padmasambhava; thus, the two are held to be virtually identical. It is in this body that Padmasambhava overcame the vast numbers of non-Buddhists and converted them to the path of the Buddha. His wrath is not so much the violence of his physical strength but the power of his mental capabilities.

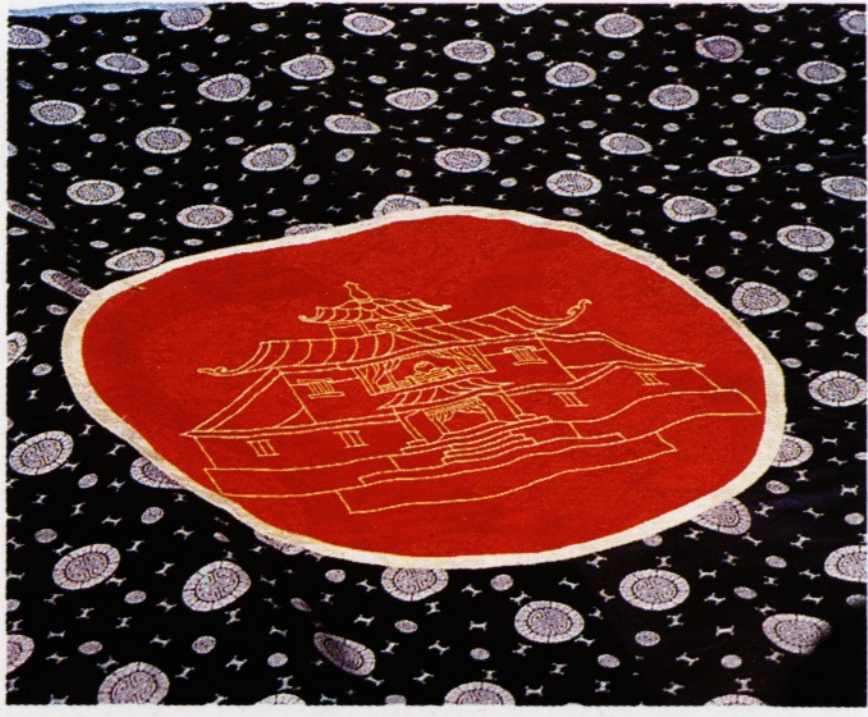
The careful reader will have noted that the word 'incarnation' was used in reference to the first three forms of

Padmasambhava and 'manifestation' was used to describe the rest of his forms. Even this distinction is not quite accurate. The first form, U-rgyan rDo-rje 'chang, is not really a separate incarnation from the last six. Only Guru Śākya Seng-ge, who is believed to have been born just after the lifetime of Śākyamuni Buddha so that he might receive the teaching first hand from the pre-eminent reciter of the *sutras* Ānanda, is separate from the others in time. Yet U-rgyan rDo-rje 'chang is distinct because he supersedes all of the others. His is the universal existence, beyond both time and space, into which and from which all the others flow. From Padma rGyal-po onward, the names are simply religious names given to the same individual in a manner to characterize the attainment that he has made after a period of meditation (usually given as five years).

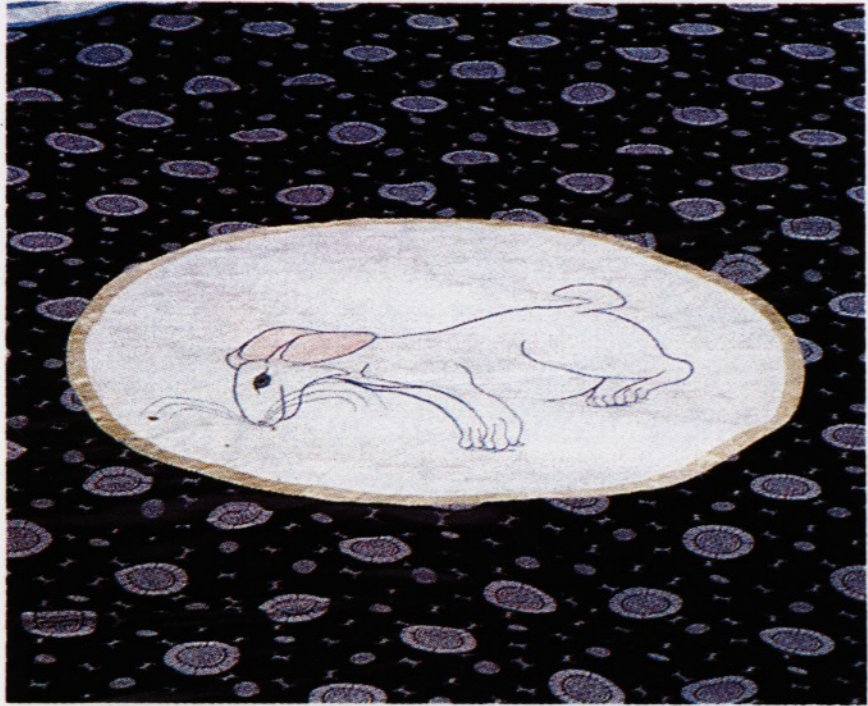
By these names and images the iconologists have attempted to communicate the universality of the personality of Padmasambhava to the observer. He holds the transcendent wisdom of all the buddhas and is the embodiment of the universality of the *Dharmakāya*. He reaches beyond all time and all sense of age to communicate his message to the faithful. Combined with the image of Padmasambhava in the central portion of the *thangka*, it is the ultimate universality of the founder of Buddhism in Bhutan that is the message and the inspiration to be found in this image. He is accompanied by two of his great patrons and two of the most popular deities of Buddhism are shown above him.

At the top of the *thangka*, the sun to the viewer's left (Fig. 17) and the moon on the right (Fig. 18) float in an ink-black universe. Within the sun symbol is a pavilion, while the moon is home for the proverbial hare, from Chinese mythology. Further down on the blue-grey mountain slopes roam the snow lions (Tb. *seng-ge*) at left (Fig. 19), the Tibetan version of the Buddhist guardian lions (*singha*), while a pair of white rabbits, quite common in Tibetan painting and inhabitants of paradises, bound across the right side (Fig. 20).

Depicted in the waters below the lotus throne of the central image of Padmasambhava are *hamsa* (geese; Fig. 21), a type of bird frequently said to inhabit paradises; offerings include elephant tusk treasures (possibly rhinoceros tusk treasures following the Chinese custom but usually called *gling-chen-mche* or *gling-mche*) and an unidentified 'crossed sticks' symbol (probably based on 'the castanets' or 'clapper' — *paiban* — of Chinese symbolism). There are several *mani* (Tb. *ma-ṅi*) gems floating in the water around the base of the lotus and stacked up in a pyramid at the base of the lotus stalk (Fig. 22). These represent the treasures of the teachings that are to be found in the vicinity of every great teacher. Directly in front of the stalk is a white



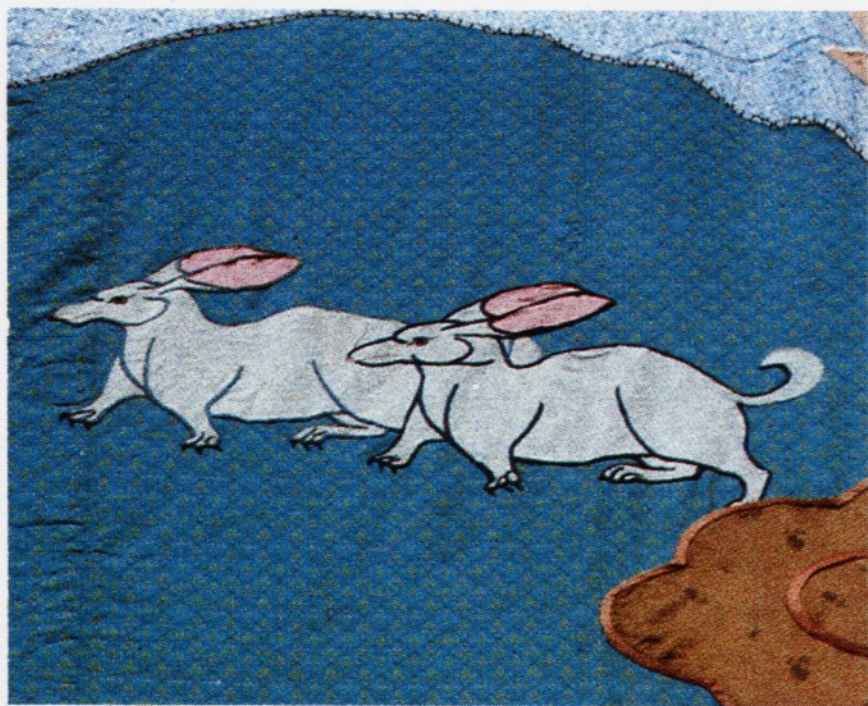
17. Sun



18. Moon



19. Snow lions



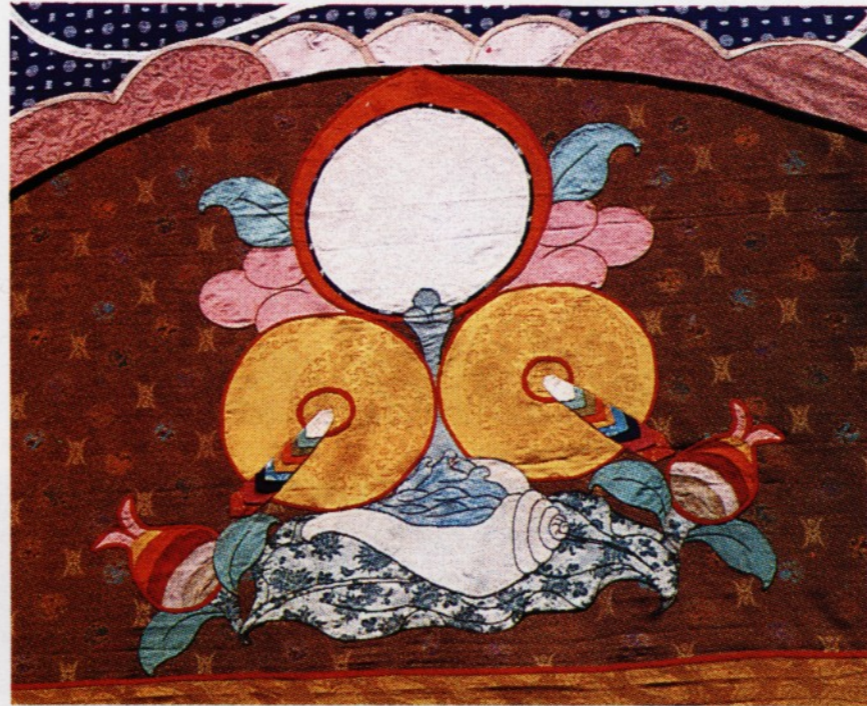
20. White rabbits



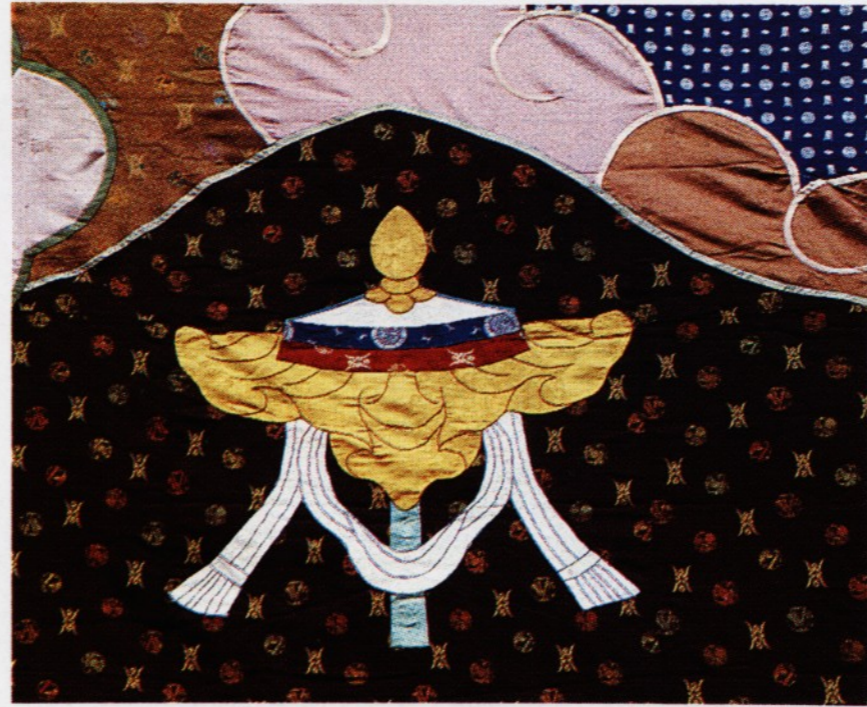
21. Hamsa (goose)



22. Base of lotus



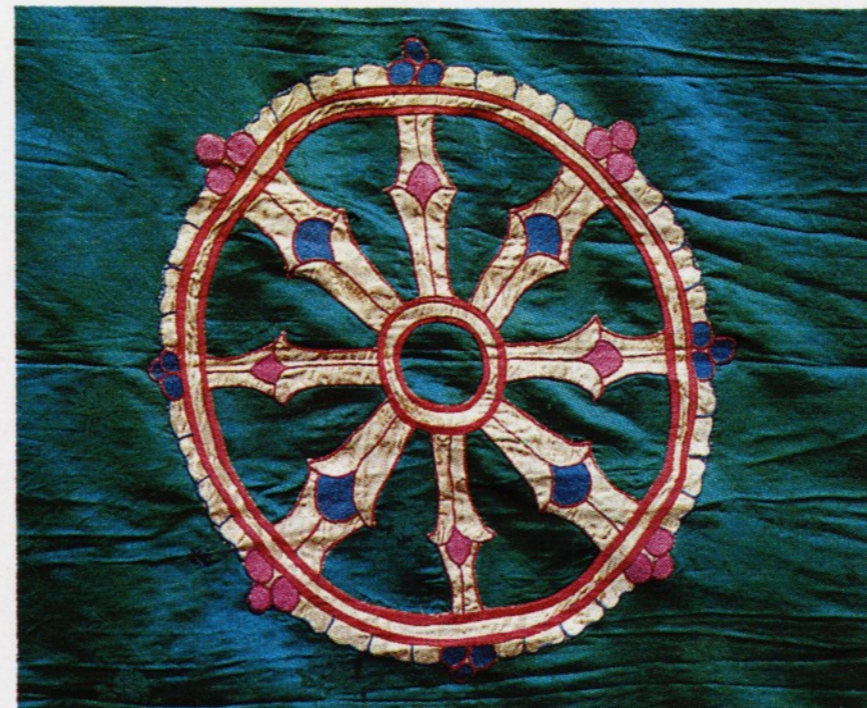
23. 'Five sense-stimulating objects'



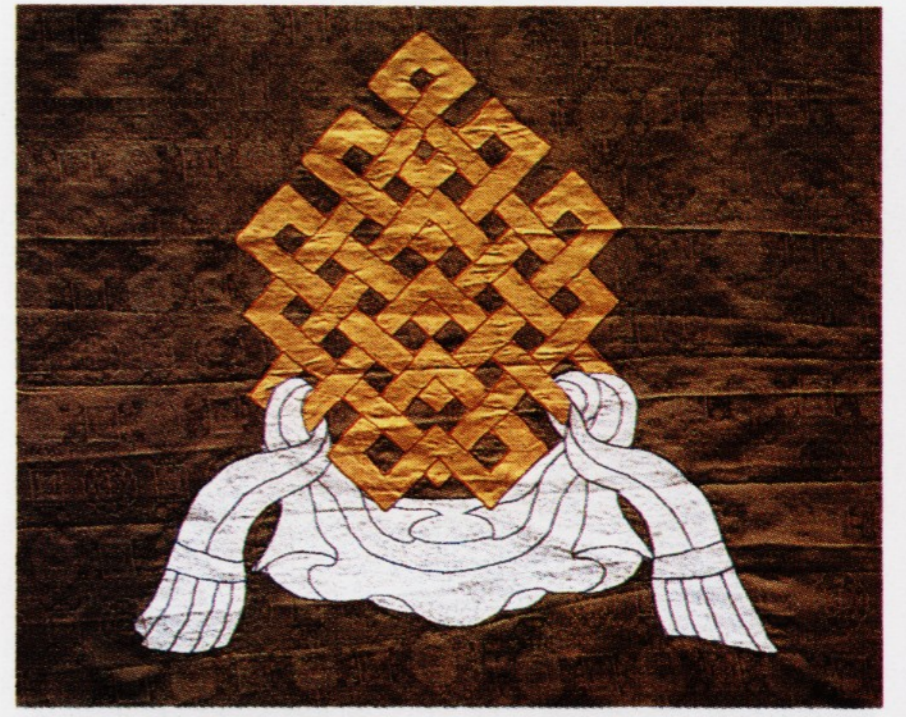
24. Parasol



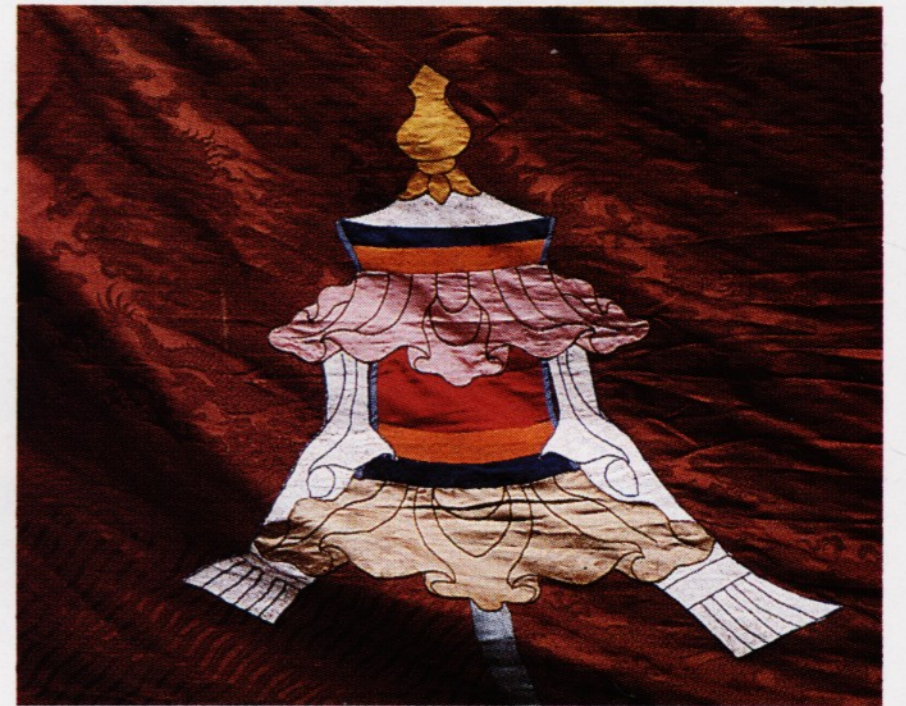
25. Viśvavajra



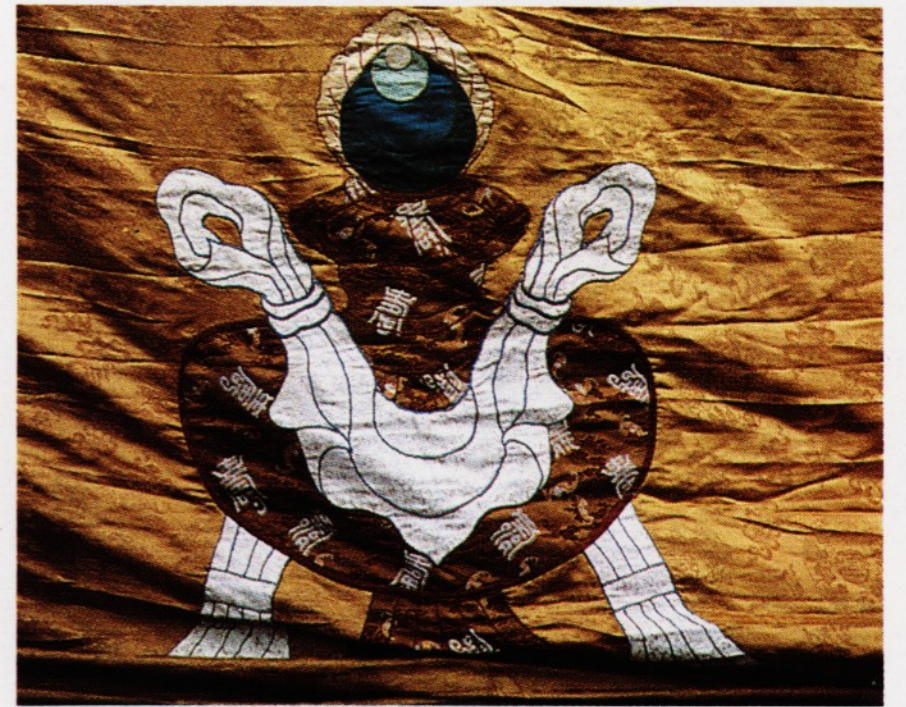
26. Wheel of the Law



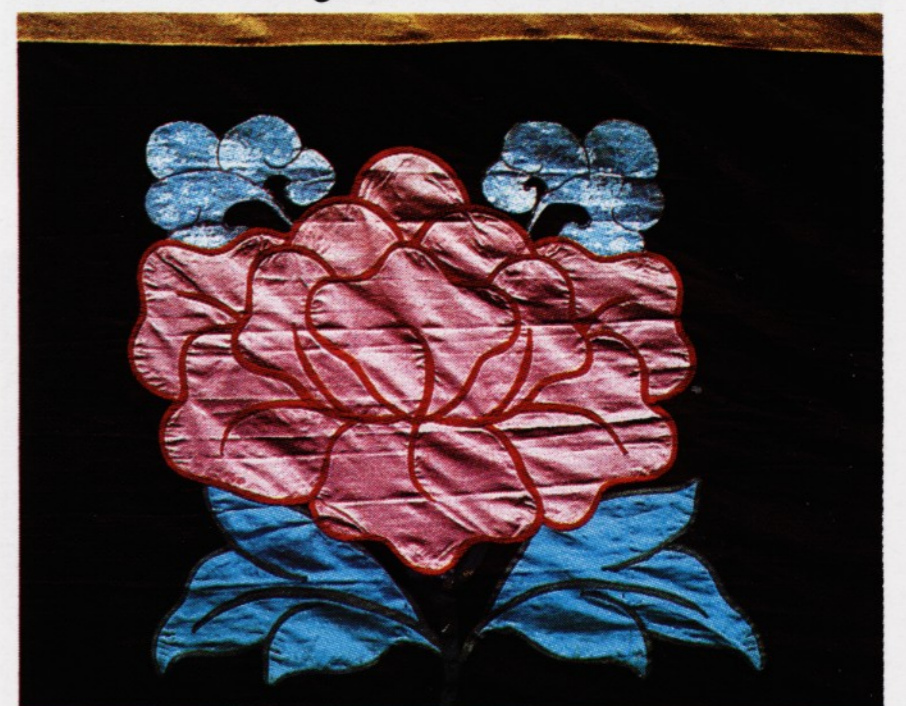
27. 'Endless knot'



28. Banner



29. Vase of *mani* gems



30. Lotus



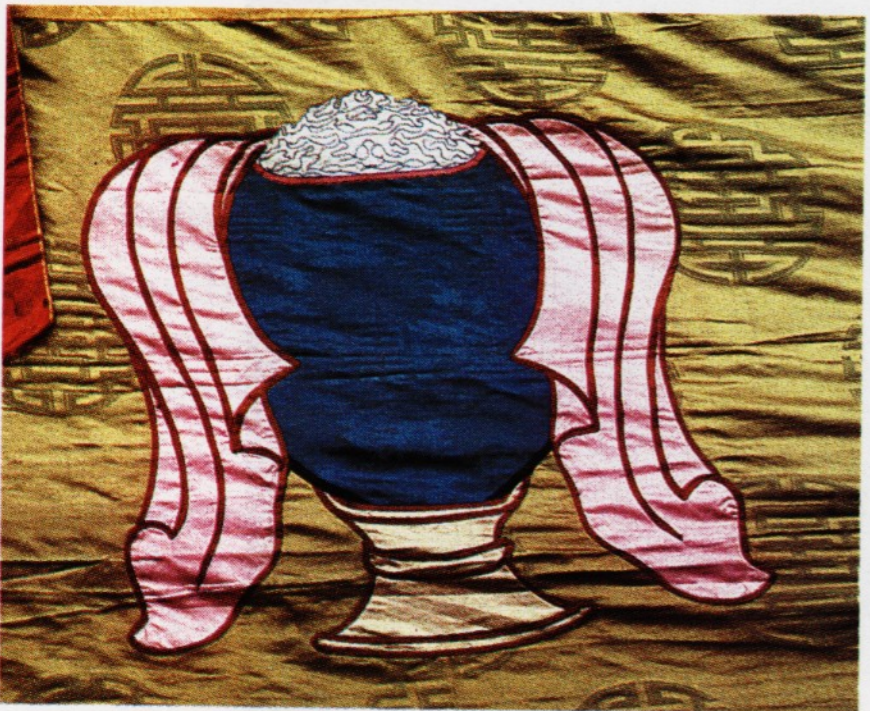
31. White conch



32. Twin golden fish



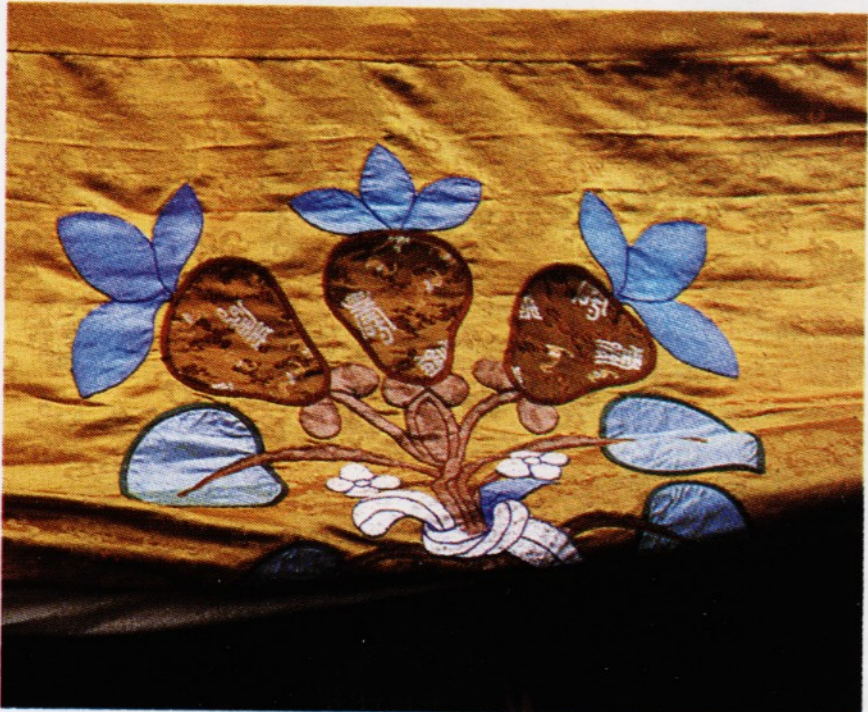
33. Vase containing *Gi-yang*



34. Mendicant's bowl containing yoghurt



35. *Kuśa* grass



36. Peaches

conch shell (Sk. *śankha*; Tb. *dung-dkar gyas-dkyil*) from which trumpets (to broadcast the *Dharma*) and water offering vessels are made.

Directly below the stem of the lotus superimposed on the central hill of the landscape in the centre of the composition is a set of ritual objects known as the 'five sense-stimulating objects' (Tb. *'dod-yon sna-lnga*; Fig. 23). The senses are represented by objects that stimulate them: sight, the mirror (Tb. *me-long*); sound, the cymbals (Tb. *sil-snyan*); smell, fragrance (Tb. *dri*; Sk. *gandha*), the conch shell containing perfume (Tb. *dri-chu*, literally, 'fragrant water'); taste, peaches (Tb. *shing-tog*); touch, the scarf (Tb. *kha-btags*), which billows around the group. This is a profound symbol for it is through the transmutation of the sense perceptions that the realizations are made which lead to the practitioner's enlightenment. To the viewer's right is another mirror that demonstrates the beginning of the path while to the left is a parasol (Fig. 24) symbolizing the final victory and the attainment of enlightenment; these are also part of the symbolic groups on the lower border of the *thang-ka*.

Along the bottom of the *thang-ka* are a series of seventeen symbols; some of the symbols — that in the exact centre which is obscured by a cloth-covered offering (see Fig. 1, p. 46) and the four symbols from the far right hand side of the *thang-ka* which apparently were never unrolled so that they could be photographed — cannot be described but may be surmised. The others (Figs 25-36) are easily recognizable. To the far left and presumably matched by an identical or parallel symbol on the far right is a *viśvavajra* (Tb. *rdo-rje rgya-gram*; Fig. 25). In this context, it is the symbol of 'absolute universality' as demonstrated by the cosmic mountain Mount Meru, on which the Padmasambhava icon and his entire entourage are understood to be seated. The centre of the *viśvavajra* is conceived of as the 'undifferentiated universal' (Sk. *śūnyatā*, often described in English as the 'unconditioned potential') with its four divisions spreading to each of the cardinal directions generating all manifest phenomena. Conceptually resting above the *viśvavajra* is the entire *mthong-grol thang-ka*, thus providing the knowledgeable viewer with a map of the inner essence (Sk. *garbha*) of the ultimate reality of Buddhism. The presumably two *viśvavajras* are specific symbols demonstrating the absolute reality of the universal and are therefore a kind of coding as to the sacred location of the scene above.

To the viewer's right of the *viśvavajra* are seven of the eight symbols of good fortune (Sk. *aṣṭamaṅgala*; Tb. *bKra-shis rTags-brgyad*, pronounced *tashi tag gya*; Figs 26-32). The other symbol (the parasol; Fig. 24) is above the border in the main field of the *thang-ka* to the viewer's left of the

five sense-stimulating objects. In traditional order, the symbols begin as emerging from the parasol near the centre of the *thang-ka* and flowing out towards the edge (the reverse order of Figs 26 to 32). In this order, the symbols are: the precious parasol (Sk. *chattrā*; Tb. *rin-chen gdugs*, pronounced *rinchen duk*; Fig. 24) that shades the enlightened beings and protects them from evil; the twin golden fish (Sk. *suvarna matsyā*; Tb. *gSer-gyi nya*, pronounced *sergi nya*; Fig. 32) symbolizing the beings saved by the Buddha's *Dharma* from the ocean of suffering; the third symbol is the white conch with a right-handed spiral (Sk. *śankara*; Tb. *Dung-dkar gyas-'khyil*, pronounced *Doongkar yakhyil*; Fig. 31) which, when used as a trumpet, proclaims the pure fame (Sk. *kirtī*) of the great teachers, especially Śākyamuni Buddha; following this is the Asiatic Lotus (Sk. *puṇḍarīka* or *padma*; Tb. *pad-ma bZang-po*, pronounced *padma zangpo*; Fig. 30) which symbolizes the primordial purity that the enlightened ones have attained; the next symbol is the vase of *maṇi* gems (Sk. *kalaśa*; Tb. *gter-chen-pai' bum-pa*, pronounced *terchenpai bumpa*; Fig. 29) — the Tibetan name literally means 'vase of the great treasure repository', with the implication that the treasure is the teachings of Buddhism, represented by the *maṇi* gem, the blue egg-like form emerging from the neck of the vase. The above symbolize the enlightenment that awaits the faithful. The sixth symbol (Fig. 28) is a unique type of Buddhist banner or standard of cylindrical form (Sk. *dhvaja*; Tb. *mChog-gi rGyal-mtshan*, pronounced *coggi gyaltshan*, meaning literally 'victory banner of the Best [Buddhahood]'); it functions as a proclamation of the attainment of the buddhas. Following the banner is the 'endless knot' (Sk. *śrīvatsa*; Tb. *dpal-gyi be-u*, pronounced *palgyi be'u*; Fig. 27); the Tibetan means 'calf of glory', implying the love of the calf for the cow, and the symbol has come to represent love and affection. Finally is the golden Wheel of the Law (Sk. *dharmacakra*; Tb. *chos-'khor-lo* or *gser-kyi 'khor-lo*, pronounced *serki khorlo*; Fig. 26); it symbolizes the universal Buddhist law (*Dharma*) that must be followed if attainment is to be gained.

This set of eight objects is the gifts that the gods of Trāyastriṃśa heaven (the 'Heaven of the Thirty-three [gods in Indic cosmology]') presented to Śākyamuni Buddha after his Enlightenment during the fourth of his post-Enlightenment meditations (see this author's article in *Orientalism*, November 1985, p. 59). They are symbols of great antiquity in India and are found in stone reliefs at Sāñcī (although not exactly in this form) as early as the second century BC and at Mathurā as early as the first century AD. (The details of their symbolism is yet to be determined in India, although there is little doubt that the Tibetans and the Nepalese, who also use

(continued on p. 74)

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these symbols in a similar manner, believe that they are following the Indian tradition.) According to the Tibetan tradition and, therefore, presumably the Bhutanese, the gifts are laid at the feet of a great teacher in begging him to teach the *Dharma*. Thus, they are exactly what should be presented to Guru Padmasambhava as essentially a request for him to teach the *Dharma*.

Regrettably, a photograph of the central panel is not available; in theory it should display something to symbolize the entrance (Tb. *thang-sgo*, pronounced *thangka go*, literally 'thang-ka entrance') by which the observer meditatively enters the field of the *thang-ka*. The same area is also known as the 'root' or 'basis' (Tb. *rtsa-ba*, pronounced *tsawa*) implying the primordial source of the whole. This would normally have some sort of water or dragon (Tb. *klu*) symbolism. On occasion, however, the central portion of the *thang-ka* is simply known as the 'ground' (Tb. *sa*) with both the 'entrance' and the 'source' implied rather than represented.

To the viewer's right is a comparatively seldom met with set of offerings known as the 'eight auspicious substances' (Tb. *bkra-shis rdzas-brgyad*, pronounced *tashi dzagya*) that symbolize the events in the life of Śākyamuni Buddha. Again in the traditional order, these include the mirror in the main field of the *thang-ka* and continue along the border from the centre to the right (Figs 33-36; unfortunately, the *thang-ka* was never fully unfurled and the last three items remained unavailable for observation). The mirror is held to reflect the past actions (Sk. *karma*; Tb. *las*) of the observer and to prognosticate

the future of his buddhological progress. The first panel to the right of centre (Fig. 33) contains a compote, holding a lotus-born vase containing the medicinal substance known as *Gi-yang* or *Gi-hang*. It is commonly said to be the secretion of an elephant, but in medical texts is said to be solidified cattle bile; used as a pigment, it is like gamboge, however, as a medicine, it is often mixed with honey and used as an eye ointment. In the next panel (Fig. 34) is a somewhat elongated mendicant's bowl filled with yoghurt (Tb. *zho*), the food that was offered to Śākyamuni immediately after his post-Enlightenment meditations. Following the bowl is a vase of *kuśa* grass (Tb. *rtsa-dur-ba*, pronounced *tsadurwa*); Fig. 35 which is the grass Svastika (or, according to some sources, Kihli) presented to Gotama Siddhartha as he went from the Nairanjanā River towards the Bodhimandā at Bodhgayā where he would ultimately attain enlightenment. The *kuśa* grass is therefore a symbol of the potential of enlightenment of Śākyamuni Buddha. Only partially to be seen in the still rolled fourth panel from the centre are peaches (Fig. 36) which are symbols of longevity. Although not displayed, the rest of the symbols should have been a conch trumpet symbolizing the spread of the Buddhist teachings, vermilion powder (Tb. *li-khri*) and, finally, seeds of the mustard plant (Tb. *yungs-dkar*, literally 'white mustard').

Together these offerings symbolize the life and accomplishments of Śākyamuni Buddha and are therefore appropriate as an offering to the Buddha. Since Padmasambhava is considered a second Buddha, they are also especially appropri-

ate to him. Seen as a whole, the bottom of the *thang-ka* is both a demonstration of Padmasambhava's buddhahood and an offering to induce him to teach the *Dharma* to mankind.

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The photographs of the Paro Tsechu Festival and the *thang-ka* (in both Carol Stratton's, pp. 46-50, and the above article) are by Carol Stratton.