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 Uṣṇiṣavijaya, 'Queen of the Victory of the Uṣṇisa', 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. mayārapīcchā). 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 kapala (Tb. thod-phor), a cup made from the cranium of a human skull holding the five offerings of amrita (Tb. bDud-rtsi, 'nectar'). Resting in the kapala is also a tse-bhum (vase of life), a meditative device out of which the deities are seen to emerge as if on a cloud. In the crook of his left elbow rests a khagyūla (Tb. Kha-tvam-go) or ceremonial staff (Fig. 1c), consisting of trident (Sk. triśūla; Tb. rTse-gsum) points, a skull, a long dead severed head, a freshly severed head and a pīrṇaghatas (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. dākini; Tb. mKha'-rgol; Figs 2 and 3), usually identified as the Indian princess Mandāravā and the Tibetan noblewoman Ye-ches mTsho-rgyal (also known as Ye-shes mKha'-gro-ma or Žinā dākini). 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 Khandha (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 Opopame; see p. 46, Fig. 1 and no. 4 on the diagram), identifiable by his orange-red colour, his meditation posture, the dhīya-mudrā and the bowl held in his hands. In this context, he is the lord of Sukhāvati (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 Uṣṇīṣavijaya (Tb. gTsug-tor nRa-nam-par-rgyal-ma, pronounced Tsug-tor nampar gyelma; Fig. 5), commonly known in Tibetan as nRa-nam rGyal-ma (pronounced Namgyelma, 'Queen
of Victory'). The version of her depicted in the thang-ka has eight arms; the two principal ones hold a vīśvāvajra 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-sbyin Phyag-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 Phyag-rgya) which symbolizes the absence of fear by means of the teachings. The middle left hand holds the bow (Sk. çopa; 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 Uṣṇīṣavijaya, to the viewer's right is Avalokitesvara (Tb. sPyan-ras gzigs, pronounced Chenraszig; Fig. 6). Although it is not widely known in the Tibetan-Bhutanese sphere, by world Buddhist standards this is a fairly specialized form of Avalokitesvara known as Śaḍāksāri Avalokitesvara, ('Six syllable Avalokitesvara'), who is specifically the personification of the famous mantra 'Om-manipadmehum'. Devotion to him is so common, virtually universal, in the Tibetan-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 Kar-ma-pa Lama, head of the bKā'-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 'Cintāmani Gem' (Tb. ma-n), 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 Śaḍāksāri Avalokiteśvara makes anjali-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. Zhaeb-dzung 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 gags Chos-gling), a Dukpa (Tb. 'Brug-pa) monastery. The Dukpa are a branch of the Kagyupa (Tb. bKā'-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 Zhabdrug 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 Phyag-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 Rab-rgyas, 1628-96; Fig. 8), 4th Duk Desi (Tb. 'Brug-drin, regent of temporal rule under the Zhabdrung; d. 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 first incarnation, as Guru U-rgyan rDo-rje 'chang (Fig. 9), the primordial or Adi-Buddha, the first manifestation of Guru Padmasambhava; below him is Guru Blo-dan mcog-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-sgrugs (Fig. 12), the eighth manifestation. Down the right side of the thang-ka are Guru Padma Padmasambhava (Fig. 13), the fourth manifestation of Padmasambhava; Guru Padma rGyal-po (Fig. 14), the third incarnation of Padmasambhava; below that is Guru Sākyā 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 audience. In his first incarnation, it is as the Adi-Buddha ‘chang (Sk. Vajradhara, ‘Bearer of the Vajra’; Fig. 9) that Padmasambhava expresses the Dharmakāya (Fig. 17) (literally ‘the Being of the Law’), demonstrating the experiential union of skilful means and compassion (Sk. upāya and karuna, respectively) with transcendent wisdom and ‘voidness’ (Sk. prajñā and śāntaya, respectively) to the highest final enlightenment (Sk. saññākamaññā). It is the ultimate duality of all apparent ones and non-ones, termed yuganatadā (joined together) one with another in Buddhist (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 ‘reveler’ of all Buddhist texts, however, the form is also known as Padma-gSo-ba and is said in the Padma Thang-yis 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 Uddiyāna (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 Sākyā Seng-ge (Sk. Sākyasimha, 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 Sākyā 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 bhūmisparśa-mudrā (‘earth-touching gesture’). It is important to note this variation in the convention and to be aware that it may be a local Buddhist convention. Only further investigation into the iconography of Śākyā Seng-ge will determine this.

The third incarnation of Padmasambhava is as Guru Padma rGyal-pa (Fig. 14), who was the miraculously born son of King Indrabhūti (the great Indian mahāsiddha and teacher of several tantric, e.g. Śrīcakrasambhara and Vajrayoginī) of Uddiyāna. 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. nirmanakāya) emanation of Vajrasattva and the first human founder of the Vidyādharika lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. In the thang-ka, he is shown as an eastern Indian monk with a Bengali pndita’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 kāmārya, a type of offerings overflowing in his right hand. As with the images of Sākyā 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 mcog-sred (Fig. 10) is Padmasambhava as he manifested himself while living for five years a yogin’s life in the great charnel fields near Srinnapura 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 Adi-Buddha, Samantabhadra (according to the ŭNying-ma-pa tradition), Padmasambhava attained the name Guru Nyi-ma ‘od-zer (Fig. 11). Depicted with a khravanga, he points to the sun in the sky, some odsal 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 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. vajra-kīta, ritual dagger) that he carries in his left hand. Wrathful forms such as both this and the next, Seng-ge sgra-sgrugs (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-ro.
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 Sākya Seng-ge, who is believed to have been born just after the lifetime of Sākyamuni Buddha so that he might receive the teaching first hand from the pre-eminent reciter of the sutras Ananda, 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 thang-ka, 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 thang-ka, 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 (singga), while a pair of white rabbits, quite common in Tibetan painting and inhabitants of paradies, bound across the right side (Fig. 20).

Depicted in the waters below the lotus throne of the central image of Padmasambhava are barhisa (geese; Fig. 21), a type of bird frequently said to inhabit paradies; offerings include elephant tusks treasures (possibly rhinoceros tusks treasures following the Chinese custom but usually called ging-chen-mche or ging-mche) and an unidentified ‘crossed sticks’ symbol (probably based on ‘the castanets’ or ‘clapper’ — pathan — of Chinese emblem). There are several maui (Tb. ma-ni) 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
conch shell (Sk. śankha; Tb. dung-dkar gyas-dkyiḥ) 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. drod-yon sna-ingma; 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-brags), 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 visvavajra (Tb. rdo-rgje byrgwa-grams; 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 visvavajra is conceived of as the ‘undifferentiated universal’ (Sk. sūnyatā, 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 visvavajra is the entire mthong-grol thang-ka, thus providing the knowledgeable viewer with a map of the inner essence (Sk. garbhā) of the ultimate reality of Buddhism. The presumably two visvavajaras 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 visvavajra are seven of the eight symbols of good fortune (Sk. astamangala; Tb. bKa-shis rtags-brgyad, pronounced tashi tag gva; 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. chattri; Tb. rin-chen gdugs, pronounced rinchen dduk; Fig. 24) that shades the enlightened beings and protects them from evil; the twin golden fish (Sk. suvarna māyā; 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 yakhyi; Fig. 31) which, when used as a trumpet, proclaims the pure fame (Sk. kirti) of the great teachers, especially Śākyamuni Buddha; following this is the Asiatic Lotus (Sk. pungjarika 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 mani gems (Sk. kalaśa; Tb. gter-chen-yis’um-bum-pa, pronounced terchenpai bumpho; 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 mani 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. dvaja; Tb. mChog-ri rgyalmtshan, pronounced coggi gyalmtshan, 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. dharma-cakra; Tb. chos-khor-lo or gser-ki 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 Orientations, November 1985, p. 59). They are symbols of great antiquity in India and are found in stone reliefs at Sāñchi (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)
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 (Tib. *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’ (Tib. *rtsa-ba*, pronounced *tsawa*) implying the primordial source of the whole. This would normally have some sort of water or dragon (Tib. *ki-lu*) symbolism. On occasion, however, the central portion of the *thang-ka* is simply known as the ‘ground’ (Tib. *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’ (Tib. *bka-sris rdzas-bryad*, pronounced *tashi dzagya*) that symbolize the events in the life of Sakyamuni 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*; Tib. *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-borne vase containing the medicinal substance known as *Gi-yang* or *Gi-hang*. It is commonly said to be the secretion of an elephant, and 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 (Tib. *zho*), the food that was offered to Sakyamuni immediately after his post-Enlightenment meditations. Following the bowl is a vase of *kusa* grass (Tib. *rtsa-dur-ba*, pronounced *tdsadurwa*; Fig. 35 which is the grass Svastika (or, according to some sources, Kihli) presented to Gotama Siddhartha as he went from the Nairanjana River towards the Bodhimaṇḍa at Bodhgayā where he would ultimately attain enlightenment. The *kusa* grass is therefore a symbol of the potential of enlightenment of Sakyamuni 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 (Tib. *li-khar*) and, finally, seeds of the mustard plant (Tib. *yungs-dkar*, literally ‘white mustard’).

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

Sources and suggested further reading


——, *Ancient Bhutan, Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, Zürich, 1979.*


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.