Guide to symbols in this exhibition

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Luxation 1

2016
By Tsering Sherpa (Nepalese, b. 1968)
Set of sixteen panels; acrylic on cotton canvas
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2017.195a-p*
Cat. 1

The title of this work, made after the catastrophic 2015 Nepal earthquake, means dislocation or displacement. It references that disaster's devastation as well as the cultural dislocation experienced by the artist and all Tibetans in the wake of China's invasion and colonization of Tibet. Sixteen pieces of an image of the Buddhist deity Vajrabhairava are assembled into a composition whose small gaps are like chasms of missing information. The result is a vision mirroring the unenlightened viewer's confusion: particular elements are recognizable, but their sum and true significance are unclear. Vajrabhairava, the wrathful emanation of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, is meant to help conquer our most deeply seated anxieties. The journey to awakening leads to a confrontation with this very deity.

Son and student of a master Tibetan painter, Tsering Sherpa left Nepal in the 1980s for California.
Koyaanisqatsi: Life out of Balance

Contemporary life has aptly been described as a race to nowhere, a repeating circular pattern with no meaning and no essence. In this pointless race that all too often comprises our ordinary world, the big picture can elude us, minutiae obsessing our minds as if they had any lasting importance. This selection from the film Koyaanisqatsi, the title of which is the Hopi term meaning “life out of balance,” illustrates precisely this repetitive situation. The soundtrack by Philip Glass reflects in aural form director Godfrey Reggio’s vision of the endless web of compulsive action in which we are apparently enmeshed.

Koyaanisqatsi, excerpts

Directed by Godfrey Reggio
Music by Philip Glass
Duration: 3:40 min.
Copyright © 1983 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
The Buddha triumphing over Mara

800–900
India; probably Bihar
Stone
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B611S7+
Cat. 3

Made for one of northeast India’s monasteries—where many of Tibetan Buddhism’s teachings and artistic ideas originated—this sculpture shows the historical Buddha seated under a parasol and a pair of branches bearing the distinctive spade-shaped leaves of the bodhi tree. With his right hand in the earth-touching gesture, he dismisses the demon Mara’s assaults and prepares the ground, at last, for his awakening. The inscription within his halo is a doctrinal formula sometimes called the Buddhist Creed:

The Buddha has explained the cause of all things that arise from a cause. He, the great monk, has also explained their cessation.
Wheel of existence

1800–1925
Eastern Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cotton
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Zimmerman Family Collection,
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2001.3
Cat. 4

This diagram summarizes the Buddha’s enlightening vision under the bodhi tree. Gripped by the red demon Mara, the wheel is driven by three animals representing three poisons—the cock of attraction, the snake of aversion, and the pig of confusion—at its hub. Around that axle, a circuit of people moves upward to purified states and again downward to debased conditions. Their actions—polluted by the poisons—propel their perpetual cycle of birth and rebirth into six realms depicted like slices of a pie. The wheel’s outer rim is the chain of causality that binds them to the phenomenal world.

The system is a closed circle; there is no clear way out. But the Buddha, through comprehending its structure and dynamics, indeed discerned an escape route. That pathway, the Buddhist Dharma, can be learned and followed by others. Thus the Buddha appears both outside the wheel, at the upper right, and within it, near the ten o’clock mark, teaching the Dharma to a group of monks.
Gautama Buddha

800–900
India; Kashmir (present-day India or Pakistan)
Copper alloy with inlaid copper, silver, and niello
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Nasli and Alice
Heeramanneck Collection, Gift of Paul Mellon,
68.8.43
Cat. 6

Seated in yogic posture on a lotus petal–rimmed dais, the Buddha holds his hands in the teaching gesture, the “dharma wheel seal” (dharmachakramudra). The Awakened One’s distinguishing physical features include the ushnisha, a protuberance on top of his head; the urna, a whorl of hair between his eyebrows; and elongated, pierced earlobes, stretched by the heavy earrings he gave up when renouncing his princely life.

A consummate example of Kashmiri metal casting, this bronze speaks of the vibrant Buddhist culture of northwest India, one of two primary sources for the transmission of Indian philosophical and artistic practices into Tibet.
The Three Protectors of Tibet

2008
By Tserin Sherpa (Nepalese, b. 1968)
Ink and colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, Acquisition made possible by the Tibetan Study Group, 2016.305
Cat. 11

Three bodhisattvas attain great prominence in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, which focuses on the idea that all apparent objects are actually empty of material substance; this philosophy defines the Second Revolution of the Buddhist Wheel. Left to right, they are yellow Manjushri wielding his flaming sword of wisdom, white Avalokiteshvara with his top right arm holding the lotus of compassion, and blue Vajrapani holding aloft the golden thunderbolt (vajra) of power. The Three Protectors of Tibet was the last major work created by Tserin Sherpa in the traditional mode of his early training. Two of his contemporary paintings appear elsewhere in this exhibition.
Leaves from an Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita manuscript

1150–1200
India, Bengal, or Bihar (present-day India or Bangladesh)
Ink and opaque watercolors on palm leaf
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Nasli and Alice Heeramanec Collection,
Gift of Paul Mellon, 68.8.114.1-6
Cat. 8

Manuscripts of Buddhist texts were produced in great quantities in eastern India’s monasteries. Most would perish there as victims of political upheaval, harsh climate, and insects. Some, however, survived by being taken to Tibet, where Buddhist institutions continued to flourish and the dry climate was much more forgiving to their materials.

These palm-leaf pages—which would have been arranged in a pile, strung together with cords, and enclosed in wooden covers for protection—come from a copy of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita (The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses), a foundational text for the Mahayana movement, the so-called Second Revolution of the Wheel of the Dharma. Its central idea is that all forms, be they mental or material, are empty of independent existence. Instead, all things arise in dependence on a web of causes and conditions, and thus do not exist objectively as they appear to do under ordinary circumstances.
Prajnaparamita

1200–1400
Central Tibet
Copper alloy with inlaid silver and copper, gemstones, and traces of paint
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Berthe and John Ford, 91.521
Cat. 9

The goddess Prajnaparamita is the embodiment of the sacred text that shares her name. She holds her hands in the teaching gesture (mudra), but her key attribute—a book atop a lotus over her left shoulder—is now lost; it would have been a copy of the Perfection of Wisdom scripture, pages from which also appear nearby. Though made a few hundred years later, this diminutive sculpture is modeled on eastern Indian precedents of the same period that produced the palm-leaf pages of her namesake text.

The insight personified by Prajnaparamita, regarded as the “Mother of all Buddhas,” is the source of the omniscience shared by all enlightened beings. Its central philosophy: all perceptible forms lack independent existence, even when they seem to be objective facts, since they exist only through the cooperation of multiple causes and conditions.
The arhat Bhadra

1400–1500
Central Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cotton, and silk
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Zimmerman Family Collection,
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2001.6
Cat. 7

The heroic role model in early Buddhism is the arhat, a saint-like elder who has attained nirvana, becoming, literally, “blown out” like a candle, with the false idea of an independent, substantial self extinguished. Arhats continued to be venerated in later forms of Buddhism, especially in China, and aspects of this painting speak to the Chinese influence on Tibetan art. The embroidered silks framing it are pieces of a Chinese imperial dragon robe originally made for an emperor of the Ming or Qing dynasty.

Flanked by attendants, arhat Bhadra sits on an elaborate throne and makes the teaching gesture with his two hands. He appears again in the distance on the left, meditating in a snowy cave, while deities and parasol bearers float above.
The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

1800–1900
Tibet
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, Gift of the Friends of Richard Davis, 1988.34
Cat. 10

The preeminent heroic figure in Mahayana Buddhism is the bodhisattva. Although sometimes understood as fully enlightened, bodhisattvas resolve not to enter nirvana until all sentient beings have been saved from the closed cycle of existence. The great bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara, is the epitome of this ideal, working tirelessly to help all who request his aid.

Smiling, peaceful, and radiant, he holds at his heart a blue wish-fulfilling jewel. His upraised hands bear a garland of crystal meditation beads and a pink lotus blossom. Below him are two more bodhisattvas particularly important in Tibet, and above, flanked by White and Green Tara, are three patriarchs from Tibet's Gelug order, whose spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, is believed to be Avalokiteshvara's manifestation in the ordinary world.
The *mahasiddha* Kanhapa

1600–1700
Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cloth
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Berthe and John Ford Collection, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 91.518*
Cat. 13

In the Mahayana—the Second Revolution in Buddhism—full attainment of enlightenment could require innumerable lifetimes of practice, even for bodhisattvas. Consequently, innovative teachings known as tantras emerged, each promising to speed the process drastically. The swiftness and power of tantric ritual techniques are reflected in the name of the new movement: the Vajrayana or Lightning Vehicle—Buddhism's Third Revolution.

With the Vajrayana’s ascendancy, a new class of spiritual experts also came to prominence. Eccentrics called *mahasiddhas*, they specialized in unorthodox practices that often transgressed conventional social norms. One such spiritual maverick appears in this painting. Holding an antelope horn and skull cup, Kanhapa of the East, an Indian yogi of the seventh to eighth centuries, sits on a leopard skin, with a tiger curled before him and a female attendant to his left.
Padmasambhava

1300–1400
Central Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cloth
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Berthe and John Ford Collection, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 91.508*
Cat. 15

Padmasambhava, or the “Lotus-Born One,” is called Guru Rinpoche (Precious Teacher) in the Himalayas. In eighth-century Tibet, he founded what would later become the Nyingma or Ancient order of Buddhism. In Himalayan artwork, he is easily recognized by his distinctive hat with upturned flaps, associated with his birthplace in present-day northern Pakistan. His flanking consorts—the Indian princess Mandarava and the Tibetan queen Yeshe Tsogyal—reveal his transcultural biography. Many figures surround Guru Rinpoche, including, on opposite sides of the lotus stalk supporting his seat, Shantarakshita and King Trisong Detsen, who invited him to assist in Tibet’s conversion to Buddhism.

Among Padmasambhava’s extraordinary skills was an ability to see the past, present, and future at once. Thus foreseeing a period when Buddhism would be proscribed, he devised a plan to preserve the Nyingma teachings, secreting them away to be rediscovered in future centuries.
Padmasambhava

1700–1800
Central Tibet
Copper alloy, gemstones, and traces of paint
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Berthe and John Ford Collection, Gift of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, 91.530a-b*
Cat. 14

Hoping to unite his fledgling empire by establishing a new religion, Tibet’s King Trisong Detsen invited India’s foremost Buddhist scholar, Shantarakshita, to oversee the building of a monastery. But every night, the local spirits dismantled what had been built during the day. Tibet’s conversion would thus require the intervention of a sorcerer who could subdue these spirits: Padmasambhava, whose name means the “Lotus-Born One.” A Vajrayana adept from the far northwest of India, Padmasambhava founded Tibet’s oldest Buddhist order, the Nyingma. His great powers are conveyed by his wrathful visage and the implements he bears: a trident-headed staff decorated with three heads in varying stages of decay, a skull cup filled with the nectar of immortality, and, now missing from his right hand, the ultimate spiritual weapon, the lightning-bolt vajra. A painting of Padmasambhava also appears in this gallery, revealing the founder of Tibetan Buddhism in full color.
The Buddhist adept Virupa

Approx. 1659–1671
Central Tibet; Gongkar Chode Monastery, U-Tsang province
Pigments on cloth
Cat. 23

Formerly abbot of the great Indian monastery of Nalanda, Virupa left his official post after his enlightenment to become a wandering Vajrayana adept (*mahasiddha*). His extraordinary appearance in this work refers symbolically to his enlightened understanding of normal reality as nothing but a convention itself.

Virupa’s distinctive gesture, finger raised upward, refers to a time when, on an epic drinking spree, he agreed with the tavern’s proprietor to settle the bill at sunset. Intent on continuing his binge, however, he used his great meditative powers to stop the golden orb in its course, ransoming it until the local ruler, fearful of scorched fields, paid his tab. As with his appearance, this incident represents symbolically Virupa’s ability to transcend and influence ordinary experience.

Among the figures surrounding Virupa is the *mahasiddha* Kanhapa, blowing a horn as he does in another painting in this gallery. Here, the second, small image of Virupa in the sky corresponds to a vision of him experienced by the early Sakya patriarch Sachen Kunga Nyingpo.
The Buddhist adept Virupa

Approx. 1400–1450
China; Beijing
Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
Bronze with gilding
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B62B20
Cat. 22

Following its steep decline from roughly 850 to 1000, Buddhism was reintroduced to Tibet through a wave of spiritual masters who brought teachings from India and founded the New (Sarma)—as opposed to the Ancient (Nyingma)—orders. One such early master was Virupa, the ninth-century Indian originator of what became Tibet's Sakya order. He left his prestigious post as a monastic official to become an adept (siddha), a spiritual eccentric with seemingly magical abilities to intervene in otherwise ordinary events.

Flowers in his hair and a meditation band around his knees, Virupa raises his fingers to the sun, stopping it in its course with his magical powers (siddhi). This sculpture speaks of Tibetan religious and artistic influence at the Chinese imperial court, initiated with a political alliance between the Sakyas and the Mongols in the thirteenth century.
The Buddhist adept Milarepa

1800–1900
Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cloth
Cat. 19

White-robed “Cotton-Clad Mila” sits on a grand throne, instructing seven disciples through his favorite teaching medium: songs. His white robe makes him easy to discern in scenes from his life that dot the surrounding landscape. They trace his transformation from a sinful youth, through the many trials he endured under his fierce-tempered Buddhist teacher Marpa, to his mastery of Vajrayana teachings, and to his eventual achievement of buddhahood after years of meditation in a secluded mountain retreat. The heavenly scenes above include tantric meditation deities and, top center, the Primordial Buddha Vajradhara flanked by the Indian mahasiddhas Tilopa and Naropa, Milarepa’s spiritual forebearers.
The Buddhist adept Milarepa

1375–1425
Central Tibet
Copper alloy with traces of color, and paper prayer scrolls
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Zimmerman Family Collection, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2001.4
Cat. 20

Tibet’s first native-born Buddhist adept and founder of the Kagyu order, Milarepa (possibly 1040–1123) preached through folk songs and poems, making complex Buddhist ideas accessible to ordinary people. He is instantly recognizable by his hand-to-ear gesture, referencing both his devotional singing and the oral transmission of tantric teachings.

Like Padmasambhava, Virupa, and other Vajrayana Buddhist masters, Milarepa was something of a mystic wild man and possessed extraordinary powers. Seated on an antelope skin, he holds a human-skull cup from which he might drink ambrosia.

This sculpture once contained printed scrolls and other consecration items—including a symbolic spine of wood with an attached rock-crystal heart—intended to infuse the image with Milarepa’s virtual presence.
The spiritual life of the lama Tsongkhapa

1400–1500
Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cloth
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Nasli and Alice Heeramanec* Collection, Gift of Paul Mellon, 68.8.117
Cat. 26

An extraordinarily capable scholar, the lama Tsongkhapa possessed equally impressive visionary and magical capabilities. Small vignettes of events—many miraculous—from the Gelug founder’s spiritual journey toward enlightenment surround his large portrait. Believed to be one of the oldest surviving depictions of Tsongkhapa, it was perhaps painted within a generation of his death and before a definitive iconographic distinction was drawn between the red-hatted Sakya and the new yellow-hatted Gelug. Eventually, the monasteries Tsongkhapa founded became the largest in Tibet, and the ascendant Gelug order grew so powerful that its ruling Dalai and Panchen Lamas came to dominate Tibet’s secular authority.
The lama Tsongkhapa

1700–1900
China
Bronze with gilding
Cat. 25

By the dawn of the fifteenth century, Tibet’s deeply entrenched Buddhist institutions were ripe for reform, a challenge undertaken by the lama Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), arguably the most influential scholar in Tibetan history. He founded the Gelug order, known for its distinctive yellow, high-pointed hats. Here Tsongkhapa fittingly makes the teaching gesture as he holds the stalks of two lotuses whose blooms rise above his shoulders and bear a sword and a book, symbols that reveal him as an emanation of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri.

Tsongkhapa’s Gelug order formed an alliance with the Mongols in the sixteenth century, quickly becoming the preeminent Buddhist order in both Tibet and Mongolia and catalyzing the already-established flow of artistic ideas and products between these culture zones.
Padmasambhava as Guru Drakpochey

Approx. 1525
Tibet
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, Gift of the Connoisseurs’ Council, 1992.344
Cat. 18

For Tibetan Buddhism’s earliest Nyingma teachings to survive the era of Buddhism’s near extinction in the region (850–1000), extraordinary intervention was required. Anticipating this period, the lama Padmasambhava concealed the teachings in both physical locations and in the minds of his students. These hidden treasures (terma) would be rediscovered at prescribed future times, whether unearthed from the ground or recovered from the minds of those disciples in subsequent rebirths. The dark-red winged deity embracing his blue consort at the center of this painting embodies one of those hidden teachings, recovered by Pema Lingpa (seated upper right) around the turn of the sixteenth century. This deity, Guru Drakpochey, is a fierce manifestation of Padmasambhava himself (upper left), capable of destroying all obstacles, however dreadful, to enlightenment.
The lama Tashipel

1210–1273  
Tibet; Taklung Monastery  
Colors on cotton  
Asian Art Museum, Gift of Marsha Vargas Handley and the Connoisseurs’ Council, 2013:19  
Cat. 21

As suggested by the iconography of its founder Milarepa—who, hand held to ear, preached through song—the Kagyu (literally, the “Oral”) order particularly emphasized the direct transmission of teachings from lama to student. In this portrait of the Kagyu lama Tashipel (1142–1210) the images in the top register depict the members of his Kagyu lineage in chronological order. It begins with the blue buddha Vajradhara, passes through the Indian mahasiddhas Tilopa and Naropa, goes down to the Tibetan translator Marpa and his student Milarepa, then the Kagyu lama Gampopa, and is finally received by Tashipel’s immediate teacher, Phagmodrupa. This last figure sits directly above Tashipel, as if pouring the lineage into him.

Smiling, facing forward, and making the teaching gesture (mudra), Tashipel projects his lineage’s wisdom into the future. His ability to do so also transcends space and time, as indicated by his appearance below his throne, where he gazes out of multiple buildings simultaneously.
The refuge tree of the Gelug order

1800–1900
Tibet
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, Gift of the Xianming Ge Collection, 2002.29
Cat. 27

The lama Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelug order, sits at the summit of a mountain-like lotus held aloft by a massive tree trunk that rises from the primordial waters. Above are the teachers in his direct lineage, stretching back to the Primordial Buddha Vajradhara at the tree's peak. To his left and right are teachers belonging to two different schools of philosophy. Below are numerous deities and perfected beings from Tibetan Buddhism's vast pantheon.

Tsongkhapa based many of his teachings on visionary communications with other teachers and deities from across Tibetan Buddhism's universe. Like a lens, he gathered their diverse wisdom and focused it into a coherent system. Paintings like this present a hierarchal arrangement of these teachers, formulated into a kind of cosmographic family tree.
Sakya lineage

1500–1600
Central Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cloth
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Nasli and Alice Heeramanneck Collection,
Gift of Paul Mellon, 68.8.118
Cat. 24

The teachings of Virupa, upon which the Sakya tradition is based, were received through a series of visions by that order’s patriarch, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo. In its inception, then, the Sakya lineage was a visionary line, rather than one of direct oral transmission emphasized by the Kagyu or one of the time-transceding Nyingma terma treasures.

Once Sachen founded the Sakya Monastery, however, a new, strictly historical line of succession took shape, with the legitimacy of its teachings dependent on their demonstrable transmission from lama to pupil. This picture features two human links in that lineage’s chain of wisdom. The pupil, on the right, is Gorampa Sonam Sengge (1429–1489), future abbot of the great monastery of Ngor. In the painting around the corner, Gorampa, now the teacher himself, faces directly toward the viewer.
Gorampa Sonam Sengge, sixth abbot of Ngor

Approx. 1600
Central Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cloth
"Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Berthe and John Ford Collection, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 91.514"
Cat. 28

Gorampa Sonam Sengge led the Sakya Monastery at Ngor in the 1480s and was also a member of the important Lamdrey teaching lineage. This painting comes from a set whose central figures trace that line of teachers. Around Gorampa are his teachers and their teachers before them: the "power lines" through which flow the authenticity and effectiveness of his wisdom. His hands appropriately in the teaching gesture, Gorampa now offers to share his knowledge with us. Virtually present, his face suffused with wisdom and compassion, we can imagine that Gorampa first conducts a series of initiation rites, described in the nearby panel. At the end of these rites, Gorampa presents us with a mandala, or meditation map (also in this gallery) that will guide our journey from here onward.
Gorampa’s Reverse: A Stupa-Shaped Consecration Inscription

The lamas of Ngor Monastery transformed this painting of Gorampa into his virtual presence through a ritual of consecration called *rabney* in Tibetan. The inscription on the reverse of the painting, depicted here, reveals how the process worked. First, the consecrating lama visualized an image of Gorampa descending into his painted representation. Then, the lama inscribed verses in the shape of a stupa on the back of the painted image, thereby depositing Gorampa’s intelligence into it.

Along with the Buddhist Creed, other details of the consecration ritual appear on the back of this painting. Written syllables are behind each of the painted figures at their brow, throat, and heart. These represent the body, speech, and mind of the corresponding figures on the front. Also included in the stupa-shaped inscription are verses praising, among other things, Gorampa’s excellence as a teacher and his compassion.

Image: Gorampa Sonam Sengge, sixth abbot of Ngor; reverse of painting. *Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*
Mandala of Vajrabhairava

1650–1750
Tibet; Ngor Monastery
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B63D5
Cat. 60

The style of this mandala is associated with the Sakya order’s monastic and artistic centers in south-central Tibet. The aesthetic arguably reached its apogee at Ngor, where this mandala was created and where Gorampa Sonam Sengge served as abbot.

Characteristic of this style, the background is composed of intricate scrolling patterns, and comparatively thick black outlining causes often-minute imagery to stand out, as if in relief. The overall pictorial expression is one of precise, crystalline clarity especially appropriate to the visionary universes of mandalas.

During the culminating crucial phase of the initiation rite (see initiation panel in this gallery), our guide Gorampa unveils this painting to us. He tells us to impress all its imagery upon our memories, so that we may recall it at will in our mind’s eye when meditating. During the next phase of our journey toward enlightenment, Gorampa will describe various aspects of this map, beginning with its periphery and continuing toward our journey’s culmination at its center.

This mandala map shows the regions that you will explore as you enter the next gallery.
Mandala of Vajrabhairava

1700–1800
Tibet
Metal with gilding and inlaid semiprecious stones
Asian Art Museum, Gift of Raymond G. and Milla L. Handley, B86M19
Cat. 68

This sculptural mandala is a slightly simplified version of the painting that serves as our meditative map. It also reminds us that the painting is merely a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional, multilevel environment of habitable space through which we visualize ourselves moving. The sculpture includes the painting’s flame circle, funeral grounds, and ring of lotus petals, here inlaid with turquoise. On the lotus’s foundation is the square palace whose bottom gateway—depicted as if falling outward from the square walls—we now prepare to enter.
Pair of pillars and brackets

1800–1900
Tibet
Colors and gold on wood
*The Newark Museum, Purchase 2004, Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund, 2004.18.1.1AB and 2004.18.1.2AB*
Cat. 70

These pillars may have once flanked the entryway of a Tibetan temple. They now suggest the gateway of the mandala’s square palace that we approach. Above wish-fulfilling vines and other auspicious symbols near the bases, serpentine dragons meander up the column shafts. They glare fiercely to ward off any who should not enter. Long cloud-scroll brackets above the pillars’ delicate capitals feature images of the Buddha in small niches.
Temple hanging

1400–1450
China
Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
Silk with multicolor embroidery
Asian Art Museum, Museum purchase, City Arts Trust Fund with additional funding from the Connoisseurs’ Council, 1990.212
Cat. 69

The embroidered banner overhead likely once hung above an important doorway, much like the visionary entryway to the mandala’s palace. It, in fact, also comprises a mandala, not as a circular form viewed from above but stretched into a linear composition. The lowest horizontal band corresponds to the painting’s black circle punctuated by vajras, beyond which, rather than funeral grounds, are enchanting estates. The towers then rising from a stone wall are the four gateways into the palace enclosure, the two half gates at the ends conceptually joined to complete the circuit. The central gate's red doorway stands partially opened, inviting us to enter.
Flaming trident

1700–1800
Tibet
Iron, silver, and gilded copper
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Zimmerman Family Collection in honor of Joe Dye on the occasion of VMFA’s 75th Anniversary, 2010.84
Cat. 67

This striking ritual implement resembles both Yama Dharmaraja’s skull-headed club and his consort Chaumundi’s trident. Within its toothy, grinning skull is an object that rattles when the scepter is handled. Its most intriguing aspect, though, is the form of the skull’s reverse side. Unmistakably phallic, it is a reminder that sex and death are inextricably conjoined. Sex defeats death through reproduction, which in turn ensures death’s triumph.
The Buddhist deity Yama Dharmaraja

Probably 1850–1900
Tibet
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60D25
Cat. 12

Yama Dharmaraja is one of several terrifying forms assumed by the bodhisattva Manjushri—shown at the top center—to defeat the Lord of Death. He is black or dark blue in color, is fiercely animated, and wields a skull-headed cudgel and a coiled lasso. Wearing a crown of skulls and a garland of freshly severed heads, he is surrounded by flames, six fearsome attendants, and grisly offerings in skull cups. Deliberately shocking, the vulgarity of his visible carnal desire for his consort Chaumundi, who is also described as his sister, is matched by that of the bull they stand on, which copulates with a human corpse.
The Melt

2017
By Tserin Sherpa (Nepalese, b. 1968)
Acrylic, ink, and gold on canvas
Asian Art Museum, Museum purchase, 2017.44
Cat. 76

The journey toward awakening is an unfolding process of recognition, the gradual discernment of patterns within the disorder of everyday experience. By analogy, this painting’s melting swirl of vibrant colors will soon take shape. Distorted, it is a form of the next enlightened being we will encounter. A green serpent necklace, a black-and-yellow tiger-skin sash, a kaleidoscopic garland of severed heads, and claw-studded pink appendages all whirl around the painting’s blue center whose depths reveal three eyes and a fanged mouth. Artist Tserin Sherpa’s warped image of Black Cloak Mahakala belongs to his sustained contemplations of the role of traditional imagery in our contemporary world.
Six-Armed Mahakala

1840
China
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Bronze with gilding
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60B156
Cat. 71

Mahakala assumes dozens of different forms, but one of the most recognizable—and similar to the guardians within the mandala’s palace—is Six-Armed Mahakala. Intensely frightening, he is shown with gnashing fangs, a glowering visage, a crown of skulls, and a snake-infested conflagration of hair. In his two primary hands, he pulverizes our egos in a skull cup with his curved-blade flaying knife. An inscription on the back of the sculpture provides details of its commission during the reign of China’s Daoguang emperor.
Six-Armed Mahakala

1700–1800
Tibet
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60D45
Cat. 72

Studded with dazzling gold ornaments, Mahakala's dark form emerges from the ghostly glow of a flayed elephant skin stretched behind his back and an elephant-headed figure trampled below his feet. Six-Armed Mahakala is a wrathful manifestation of Avalokiteshvara; the rosary of human skulls in his upper right hand is a terrifying transmutation of the bodhisattva of compassion's crystal meditation beads. Around his pedestal, in flame-filled corpse grounds, are five members of his entourage, and he appears in two additional forms at the bottom. Among the lineage figures at the painting's top is a lama of the Gelug order, whose teachings are protected by Six-Armed Mahakala.
Black Cloak Mahakala

1500–1600
Tibet
Pigments on cloth
*Rubin Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin, C2006.66.678
Cat. 75

Like all of Mahakala's many forms, his Black Cloak manifestation emanates from a magical staff. Appearing as a dwarf wearing a black cloak, he protects the black-hatted Karmapas, leaders of a prominent Kagyu-order lineage, one of whom sits at the painting’s top center. This gruesome form of Mahakala—with his enormous blue head, cavernous maw, and jagged talons—is the subject of contemporary artist Tsherin Sherpa's swirling gold-ground painting *The Melt*, on view in this section of the exhibition.
Ritual Musical Instruments

Ceremonial musical instruments comprise one broad class of ritual tools. Ranging from percussive cymbals and drums to haunting trumpets, they are played to summon and appease deities and to keep negative spirits at bay. Many of these instruments are made of precious materials or substances imbued with power, including jewels and human bones.

Conch shell horn

1700–1800
Tibet
Conch shell mounted on gilded silver with inlaid jewels
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60M3
Cat. 37
Drum

1800–1900
Tibet
Bone, hide, silver, coral, turquoise, and fabric
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Berthe and John Ford*, 91.537
Cat. 39
Thighbone trumpet

1800–1900
China; Dolonnor, Inner Mongolia
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Human bone and brass
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60B219
Cat. 38
Meditative and Magical Weaponry

Meditative equipment often takes the form of utilitarian tools, especially weapons. These tools are laden with symbolic imagery created to enrich and empower the meditative process.

The ritual stake, a tetrahedral-bladed dagger, pins down malevolent spirits. The skull cup and the flaying knife are often paired in a wrathful deity’s opposing hands. The blade of the knife is curved to match the skull’s concavity. Like a mortar and pestle, these ritual tools are used to reduce all ordinary sense-based experience to its ultimate, empty nature, thus obliterating the negative thoughts and emotions that result from the false conception of an independent, substantial self.

The quintessential ritual implement of Himalayan Buddhism is the vajra. Its name, meaning “lightning” or “diamond,” denotes the power, speed, and indestructibility of Tibetan Buddhist practice, known as the Vajrayana. In rituals, it is often paired with the bell. Whereas the vajra symbolizes the masculine aspect of the Vajrayana’s spiritual strategies, the bell represents the feminine aspect of its wisdom. Used together, they signify the union of the two, which leads to awakening.
Ritual stake

1600–1800
Eastern Tibet
Copper alloy with gilding, iron, pigments, and turquoise
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Arthur*
*Glasgow by exchange, 93.18*
Cat. 43
Bell and vajra

China
Ming dynasty, reign of the Yongle emperor
(1403–1424)
Bronze with gilding
*Asian Art Museum, Gift of Margaret Polak,*
B85B3.a-.b
Cats. 49 and 50
Skull cup

Approx. 1850
China; Dolonnor, Inner Mongolia
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Human skull and copper
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60M6.a-.c
Cat. 47
Ewer made from human skulls

1800–1911
China; Dolonnor, Inner Mongolia
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Copper repoussé and human bone
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60M454
Cat. 29
Ritual diadem

1400–1425
China
Silk embroidery on cloth
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Kathleen Boone
Samuels Memorial Fund, 89.25
Cat. 30

43  309
Devotional Equipment

Some ritual tools are utilized in daily devotional practices. Prayer beads are used to track the number of times a prayer is recited, training the mind to remain fixed on a single subject for an extended period. A prayer wheel is used, not to count prayer recitations, but to generate them. Mantras inscribed on its exterior, together with prayers written on paper and rolled up inside its drum, are virtually recited with every revolution.

Ritual apparel is another kind of devotional equipment. In the Vajrayana, a crown is used to identify the wearer with the Five Buddhas it represents. Bone aprons, in contrast, facilitate a practitioner’s transformation into the wrathful deities that typically wear the garment.
Prayer wheel

1700–1800
Tibet
Silver, wood, nut or seed, copper alloy, paper, and silk
*Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60B158
Cat. 33
Vajracharya crown

1200–1300
Nepal
Copper alloy with gilding, and gemstones
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 84.41*
Cat. 31
Bone apron

1700–1800
Tibet
Human bone
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60M101
Cat. 48
CASE TO THE RIGHT

Turquoise prayer beads

1800–1900
Tibet
Turquoise, bone, and silver
Rubin Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Anne Breckenridge
Dorsey, C2012.6.13
Cat. 32
Flaying knife

1400–1500
Tibet
Iron and clay
*The Newark Museum, Purchase 1954, 54.350*
Cat. 42

The flaying knife is the ritual weapon favored by the figures called dakinis, literally “sky-walkers.” Dakinis use the flaying knife in combination with a skull bowl to puree negative psychological tendencies, transforming them into the nectar of immortality (amrita), as if the knife’s curved blade were a pestle to the mortar of the complementary skull bowl.
Naro Dakini

1700–1800
Tibet
Bronze and gold leaf
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mary Shepherd Slusser, 99.160
Cat. 58

Dakinis are literally “sky-walkers,” able to travel at will through space, and they appear at the corners of our Vajrabhairava mandala. Naro Dakini is a form of the wrathful female buddha known as Vajrayogini. Glowing with yogic heat, her youthful, athletic body—an outward sign of her meditative perfection—is ornamented with garments of human bone and severed heads. Victoriously trampling demons, she brandishes a curved flaying knife and brings to her lips a blood-filled skull cup, symbolically drinking the ambrosia that results from understanding all appearances as empty of any essence.
Dakini

1600–1800
Nepal
Bronze with gilding
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60S502
Cat. 59

Dakinis reveal how one of awakening’s many aspects is the unbridled energy of transcendent passion. Her leg effortlessly splayed in a nearly impossible position, head cocked skyward, and hair streaming down her back, this dakini is enlightenment’s ecstasy embodied. Historically, dakinis were likely female practitioners of yoga who inhabited such liminal locations as cemeteries; they appear in just such locations on many early thangka paintings, as similarly fierce female guardians appear in the corners of our mandala painting.
In Our Collection

To see an image of Simhavaktra, a dakini who wears a cape of human skin as a symbol of transcendence, please visit Gallery 12 on the third floor.
Painted door

1800–1900
Tibet
Wood, gesso, pigment, and metal fittings
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Zimmerman Family Collection, 2006.597*
Cat. 77

This painted door likely once safeguarded the entrance to a monastery's *gonkang*, a shrine housing wrathful protector deities and a precinct accessible only to the most advanced practitioners. Its flaming skulls and weapons would have warded off evil spirits, intruders, and those not properly initiated to enter its sanctum. The chevron-shaped lappets along the bottom recall colorful textile hangings that in other contexts might have served this same demarcating function.
The Buddhist deity Vajrabhairava

1400–1500 or later
China
Wood with multicolor paint
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation and Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund,*
93.13a-00
Cat. 78

Widely known as Yamantaka, meaning Slayer of Yama, Vajrabhairava, the Lightning Terror, personifies the victory of spiritual wisdom over death. Ferocious and commanding, he tramples a host of figures symbolizing our delusions and attachments. Each implement in his thirty-four hands represents a different aspect of his spiritual knowledge used to destroy various obstacles to awakening. Most importantly, perhaps, Vajrabhairava is a cosmic emanation of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri, whose serene face appears at the sculpture’s apex.
The Buddhist deity Vajrabhairava

1700–1800
Tibet; Ngor Monastery
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B63D3
Cat. 79

The large figure near the top of this painting is Vajrabhairava, the Lightning Terror. Below him, atop a buffalo with his consort at his side, is Yama Dharmaraja. Both are emanations of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, which accounts for their similar forms. Around them are denizens of the cemetery grounds and, above, a lineage of lamas from the Sakya Monastery at Ngor. Following the Sakya convention, Vajrabhairava's nine heads are stacked in three tiers of three. The contrasting Gelug mode—like the nearby sculpture—shows seven heads encircling the lowest tier, topped by the last two, one above the other.
The deity Vajrabhairava and consort Vajravetali

1400–1450
Central Tibet
Opaque watercolors and gold on cloth
Cat. 80

As if to signal an ecstasy hidden behind the horrors of death, Vajrabhairava, who was blue-black at the center of our mandala, is here transformed into the radiant gold of realization. The gleaming bodies of the deity and his consort are a reminder that Vajrabhairava is Manjushri’s mirror, simultaneously revealing Death to himself and incorporating us into that vision. This luminous painting is, in fact, a mandala, in a more schematic format than the cosmic bird's-eye-view type. The meditation deities at its center are surrounded by multiarmed figures very similar to the guardians of our mandala map. Additional deities, including Yama Dharmaraja, and a teaching lineage surround the configuration.
The deity Mahottara Heruka and consort

1700–1800
Tibet
Colors on cotton
Asian Art Museum, Bequest of John “Jack” Evans Kolb, 1995.60
Cat. 17

Mahottara Heruka is important to the Nyingma order, whose founder, Padmasambhava, is shown at the upper left of this painting. With his fangs bared and his pointed wings fanning a flame halo, he unites with his female counterpart. The three eyes on each of his twenty-one heads focus their fury at the fundamental fallacy of ordinary perception: the conviction that the subject-object world we know as ordinary reality is “all there is.” He and his consort bear in their many hands mirrors showing reflections of various buddhas and bodhisattvas.

In the famous work sometimes called the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Mahottara Heruka appears during the death process; if the deceased recognize him as a projection of their own mind, they will forthwith attain awakening.
The deity Vajrakila and consort Diptachakra

1500–1600
Central Tibet
Copper alloy and traces of paint
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Berthe and John Ford Collection, Gift of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, 91.524*
Cat. 16

Vajrakila is the embodiment of the three-sided ritual peg (*kila*) with which Padmasambhava is said to have immobilized the local spirits during his conversion of Tibet to Buddhism. The deity is, accordingly, especially prominent in the practices of Padmasambhava’s Nyingma order. In some of his many forms, his lower body actually takes the shape of the tetrahedral *kila*; in others, like this sculpture, he merely holds it between the palms of his principal hands. Unfortunately, none of his attributes survive here, but his consort, Diptachakra, still holds a blood-filled skull cup and a *vajra*.
The deities Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi

1600–1700
China
Ming (1368–1644) or Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Bronze with gilding
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage
Collection, B60B179
Cat. 86

Chakrasamvara’s name, Wheel-Binder, references the wheels, or chakras, within the body. This yab-yum deity’s origin is traced to a time when the Hindu gods Shiva and Parvati threatened world order through immoral behavior, namely gratuitous violence and sex. To subjugate them, the Primordial Buddha manifested as Chakrasamvara: the mirror image of the unruly Hindu divinities. This means of restraining the Hindu couple—by revealing them to themselves—parallels how Manjushri manifested as Vajrabhairava to tame Death. Hidden is the anatomically correct manner in which this exquisitely fashioned image symbolically replicates the nonduality experienced when extremes such as violence and sexuality are brought, literally, to heel.
The deities Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi

1475–1525
Central Tibet
Opaque watercolors on cloth
*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Nasli and Alice Heeramanneck Collection, Gift of Paul Mellon, 68.8.116*
Cat. 85

Chakrasamvara’s five heads — the central white one hidden — reference the Five Cosmic Buddhas. His dozen arms signify the twelve links of the Buddhist chain of causality. Representing the solidarity of wisdom and compassion are the bell and the vajra crossed behind the back of Vajravarahi. The paired deities stand at the center of a schematic mandala. A teaching lineage lines the top, and a monk with offerings, probably the painting’s patron, sits at the lower left.
The deity Guhyasamaja and consort Sparshavajra

1400–1500
China; Beijing
Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
Bronze with gilding
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B64B23
Cat. 83

Guhyasamaja means “Secret Union,” indicating the joining of apparent opposites: of male and female like these yab-yum figures, but also of the wisdom and techniques that lead to Vajrayana Buddhism's swift awakening. Both figures have six hands, and the implements they originally held were matched, each associated with one of the Five Cosmic Buddhas. Accordingly, this sublimely sculpted pair constitutes a cosmic mandala embodied.

Created in China during the period of the Ming dynasty, this image was likely made either as a gift to an important Tibetan lama or for use in a Vajrayana temple in China.
The deity Guhyasamaja and consort Sparshavajra

1475–1500
Western Tibet
Opaque watercolors, gold, and ink on cotton
Michael and Beata McCormick Collection
Cat. 84

Many of the intricate details of this stunning painting closely match a seventeenth-century textual description of Guhyasamaja:

The main face is blue with a mixed expression of fierceness and desire. The canine teeth are pointed and clenched.... All three faces are adorned with very beautiful eyebrows.... He is wearing various heavenly garments bright like Indra's rainbow.

The text also describes the implements Guhyasamaja and his consort hold that reveal them as the personification of the Five Cosmic Buddhas: the vajra and bell of Akshobhya in their central hands, the wheel of Vairochana and lotus of Amitabha in their right hands, and the gem of Ratnasambhava and sword of Amoghasiddhi in their left.
Standing crowned Buddha with four scenes of his life

Approx. 1050–1100
India; Bihar, southern Magadha region
Basalt
Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B65S11
Cat. 87

The historical Buddha stands before us, fully enlightened, yet he wears the jewels and crown of his earlier princely life. Similarly paradoxical is the figure’s seeming androgyny. This is an image of the awakened state itself, unbounded by dualities. It is, at once, the Buddha and all buddhas.

As you stand before this figure, recall that your mind has the capacity to encompass object and subject simultaneously. The image is both the object of our contemplation and, if seen from the right perspective, a likeness of its beholder’s buddha-nature as well.