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AN INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The article presents the main stages of the Buddhist art of Tibet, the formation of the Buddhist pantheon, its specificity and the influence from the earliest cults, Tantrism, Hinduism. It describes iconological hierarchy of Buddhist images and basic forms of art – the thangka, fresco, sculpture.

Keywords: Buddhist art, art of Tibet, hierarchy of deities in Buddhism, tangka, Buddhist sculpture and fresco.

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Before we talk about the Buddhist art and its iconographic principals, it may be desirable to make ourselves conversant with the sociocultural fabric of the people who have been living in the Himalayan fastness for the centuries. It may reasonably be assumed that before this area was galvanised into the Buddhist creed form Tibet since the mid-eighth century, the people had been living relatively in the primitive darkness. It was in CE 747 that Padmasambhav (Pas-ma-hbyung-gnas) (c. CE 717-762), assisted by Acharya Shantarakshit (Zi-ba-htsho) (c. CE 705-762), introduced Buddhism on the 'roof of world' from India. Two years later, he founded the first Buddhist monastery at Samya in the mainland Tibet (the central Tibet). During that period, emphasis was largely on the introduction and propagation of the dharma, and no serious effort was made for the architectural and artistic aspects of the monasteries that followed the Indian prototypes as an ideal concept of monasticism rather than an architectural prototype.

The Buddhism came under severe persecution, when Langdarma (c. CE 838-842) ascended to the throne in central Tibet. That situation continued for two-and-half centuries until the kingdom of Guge in western Tibet emerged as the stronghold of Buddhism in the Tibetan world under its sagacious king Lhachen Yeshe-O (c. CE 967-1040). He vigorously encouraged Buddhist activities and invited the great Buddhist theoretician of Nalanda, Atish (CE 982-1054) (Indian name: Dipankar Shrigyan) to Guge to purge the dharma of the animistic and diabolic elements that Padmasambhav had admitted into Buddhism to make it acceptable to the people.

Yeshe-O joined hands with the Great Lotsab Rinchen Sangpo (Rin-chen-bZang-po) (CE 958-1055) to initiate a vigorous movement of the architectural and artistic activities in the trans-western Himalayan region, which at that age constituted Ngaris (the western Tibetan kingdoms of Ladakh and Guge). During his long stay in India at various mahavihars, Rinchen Sangpo acquired firsthand knowledge of the planning concept of Indian vihars and learnt a great deal about the art and architecture of those establishments. He reproduced that knowledge by founding as many as 108 temples and monasteries in Ngaris and embellished those with the magnificent murals on the high Indian style. With that epochal reformation, he integrated religious and artistic activities to formalize a religious culture, of which the art formed an integral component.

Those monasteries not only became the nerve centers of the religious activities in Ngaris, but more so the nucleus for various art activities, because the dharma could only be popularized among the illiterate populace through the performing and visual arts that fancied them. Most of the Rinchen Sangpo foundations are now lost, but a few of those still survive in Ladakh, Lahul & Spiti and Kinnaur districts, and those can claim to be the oldest and still living repositories of the religious and artistic heritage of the Himalayan (Tibetan) Buddhism in the world.

In that creative endeavor, Rinchen Sangpo was not only assisted by his compatriots, but many Indian artists and artisans also joined him. That was the time when the various kingdoms in the Indo-Gangetic plains were collapsing under the Muslim pressure. The mahavihars and vihars were being plundered and the scholars and artists brutally tortured. The Guge kingdom under the king Ye-she-O was the most propitious place for them to seek refuge and pursue their vocations. Thus, at Tholing, the capital of Guge, all was set for the great experiment in scholarship and art. Rinchen Sangpo pooled native resources and the Indian talent to evolve a distinct art style that reflected fusion of the Indian art schools of Kashmir, ancient Bihar and West Bengal. Tucci in his Indo-Tibetica defined that art-style as the Guge-bris or the Guge style.

The movement started by Rinchen Sangpo had tremendous impact throughout the Tibetan world, and gradually the Guge-bris became a national style of Tibet as the dbUs-bris, that is, the Tibetan art style. The interiors of monasteries were painted purely on the Indian style reminiscent of the Ajanta, with large figures spread over the entire internal surfaces of the walls and ceilings. Thus, a monastery unified the earthly elements of the structure with the celestial realm of the murals to envision a veritable Bodhisattva in the architectural iconography. The colors used in the early formulation of Guge style were purely Indian, with the profusion of reds and yellows. To maintain the celestial character of the murals, the landscapes were not preferred to fill the background, but the space around the principal figure was filled with the small figures of complementary divinities. The serene faces of the divinities, with the half closed dreamy eyes, having the bow-like dented upper eyelids, sharp noses, shapely lips and the faint seraphic smile suggested deep introspective meditation. The lines were highly restrained so that the figures were never out of the poise.

After the 14th century, the religio-cultural contacts of Tibet with the Indian mainland were disrupted, and the Guge style was left on its own to develop until the 17th century, when it was overtaken by the Chinese style. Thus, Guge-bris was transformed into rgya-bris, that is, the Chinese style of painting. Under that influence, murals came to be confined within a frame; the landscapes became more animated and vivid with cliffs, whirling clouds, flame sand the stylized floral and faunal elements. The lines became highly volatile and fluent to accentuate the dramatization of figures. The intricate turns and twists of limbs and the curls of flowing and elaborate drapery were all formulated with the linear fluency. Emphasis was laid on the facial formula, characterized by the goatee beard, pointed and curled moustaches, widely opened eyes and detailed treatment

of hair. Blue color in its various shades became a favorite of the artists. Under that influence, the Guge style gradually imbibed the characteristics of Chinese painting until the earlier style was completely superseded by the Chinese diction in art. At that later stage, the Buddhist art of Tibet had become stylistically so mixed up that it could at best be described as a hybrid form of art, in which different strains were integrated.

However, with the spread of Buddhism from the mainland India, the Indian art traditions also proliferated in the Buddhist Tibet and that was further developed and perfected there by the accomplished lamas. The art of image casting, stucco making and the mural and thangka painting are some of the art techniques that came from neighboring parts of India. However, those arts were further developed and perfected in the host environment with religious zeal. Those art products, highly religious and venerable as those are, now form an inalienable part of the religio-cultural system of the Buddhist people of the high Himalayan region. To enjoy the finer nuances of that unique art, let us have an idea of its 'thematic format', 'iconology' and the 'iconographic process'.

Thematic format

The thematic format of Buddhist art based on the Mahayan Buddhism is extremely vast and equally complex under esotericism, extending over all the conceivable and unconceivable existences and the phenomenal and noumenal entities of all the spheres. Nevertheless, the simple and sombre Buddhist folk of the northeast, Sikkim and of the northwest are inherently deep into it. The most significant sub-school of the Mahayan Buddhism in the high Himalayan region is the Vajrayan Buddhism, which Padmasambhav popularized in Tibet and subsequently spread in the high Himalayan interiors as the most dominant faith system. Since the major centers of Vajrayan Buddhism are now located in the high Himalayan interiors, it may be appropriate to call that the Himalayan Buddhism. The most interesting aspect of the Vajrayan Buddhism in the context of present study is the range of its pantheistic system, which has given popular interpretation to the various complex doctrinal concepts. For that purpose, an elaborate range of Buddhas have been envisioned in the Mahayanic Buddhism, which was made further elaborate by the addition of many metaphysical manifestations and their spouses in the Vajrayan Buddhism, so much so that not only the innumerable divinities of the Shaiv and Shakta cults were admitted into it, but the hosts of pre-Buddhist Bon deities of Tibet were also assimilated to identify it with the native creeds so that it was willingly acceptable to the naïve masses. Thus, the Himalayan (Tibetan) version of Vajrayan Buddhism stands significantly different from its Indian archetype.

The Tibetan pantheon of Vajrayan Buddhism may broadly be identified in ten categories, viz. (1) the Manushi Buddhas, (2) the Dhyani Buddhas or the Jins, (3) the Celestial Bodhisattvas, (4) the Mortal Bodhisattvas, (5) the Tutelary deities, (6) the Dharampals, (7) the Dakkinis, (8) the Brahminic deities, (9) the local and country gods and (10) the family and personal gods.

(1) The Manushi Buddhas:

The most human among the Buddhas are their earthly manifestations – the Manushi Buddhas or the Buddhas of the Past Epochs (Sans-rgyasdpah-bohiduns) or the Tathagats (De-bzin-gsegs-pa). According to the Mahayanic tradition, there are seven such manifestations: (I) Vipashyin (rNam-gzigs), (II) Shikhin (gTsug-gtor-chan), (III) Vishvabhu (Tam-chad-skyob), (IV) Krakuchand (Khor-wa-hjigs), (V) Kanakamuni (gSer-thub), (VI) Kashyap (Od-sruns), and (VII) (Shakyamuni Sakya-thub-pa). All the Manushi Buddhas are shown clad in Indian monk's garb.

(2) The Dhyani Buddhas:

Among them, the Dhyani Buddhas (the Jins) and the Medicine Buddhas are represented in austere attires of the monks, seated in the vajrasan, describing their characteristic hand gestures. However, when they are depicted in the sambhog-kaya form, that is, in the refulgent reflex, they are adorned with the royal robes, jewels and crowns.

(3) The Celestial Bodhisattvas:

The Celestial Bodhisattvas are fully adorned and bejeweled. Avalokiteshvar (sPyan-ras-gzigs) is the most popular of the celestial Bodhisattvas in the Himalayan (Tibetan) Buddhism. He is represented as the four-headed and eleven-headed with the thousand eyes, one on each palm. He occupies the central position in the monasteries that Rinchen Sangpo and his contemporaries founded.

(4) The Mortal Bodhisattvas:

The Indian saints, the apotheosized lamas and the great patrons of Buddhism in Tibet have been deified as the mortal or human Bodhisattvas. Among them, the ten disciples of the Buddha and the eighteen sthavirs, who propagated dharma in different lands, are the Indian saints. Many of those sthavirs were the Buddha's contemporary, who lived after him. Besides, many theoreticians and philosophers of the Mahayan School were also deified as the Bodhisattvas. Among them, the names of Ashvaghosh, Nagarjun, Aryadev, Asang, Vasubandhu, Dharmakirti, Chandrakirti, Shantarakshit and Atish are the significant ones.

However, the tantric exponents of Mahayan School earned a higher place among the mortal Bodhisattvas. They were esteemed as the maha-siddhas. Above all, Guru Padmasambhav, the great exponent of Vajrayan Buddhism and the founder of Buddhism in Tibet is esteemed even higher to the Buddha among his followers of the Nyingmapa sect. To highlight his eightfold tantric faculty, he is represented in iconography in eight manifestations. These are: (I) the Guru Rimpoche (the Precious Teacher), (II) the Pamasolwa (Padmasambhav in the mahamudra posture), (III) the Guru Pama Gyalpo (the King-possessor of the Tripitak), (IV) the Guru Dorje Dolo (the Diamond Protector), (V) the Nyma Ozer (the Radiant Sun of darkness), (VI) the Shakyasengge (the Second Shakya), (VII) the Guru Sengge Dadag (the Propagator of dharma) and (VIII) the Lodan-Chog-sre (the Propagator of Knowledge).

Fig, 1. Guru Padmasambhav –
the great exponent of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Among the apotheosized Tibetan lamas, the founders of different sects have been ranked as the Bodhisattvas. Thus, Tsongkhapa — the founder of Gelukpa, Marpa and Milaripa — the founders of Kargyupa and Sakya Pandit — the famous lama of Sakyapa were deified. The status of Bodhisattva was also conferred upon Songtsen Gampo (CE 617-649): the sagacious king of Tibet, Thomi Sambhot, who introduced script for the Tibetan dialect, and the king Trhisong Detsen, who invited Padmasambhav to Tibet. The two wives of Songtsen Gampo: Kong-jo Wencheng from China and Bhrikuti from Nepal were also deified as the female Bodhisattvas as Dolma Karpo (the White Tara) and the Dolma Janguli (the Green Tara) respectively. Incidentally, the Dolma Janguli (Green Tara) and the Dolma Pagmo (Marichi Vajra Varahi) are the two most revered of the 21 manifestations of Tara in the Tibetan Buddhism.

(5) The Tutelary Deities:

The demonic manifestations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are defined as the tutelary deities, but different sects of the Tibetan Buddhism have also envisioned their own sectarian yi dam lha (tutelary deities). Thus, rDo-rje jigs-byed (Vajra Bhairv) and bDe-mchog (Samvar) are the tutelary deities of the Gelukpa, the rDo-rje phur-ba (Vajra Phurba) of the Sakyapa and other sects also have their own yi dam lha (tutelarydeities), like other tutelary deities are Kye-rdo-rje (Hevajra), Sans-gyes-t'od-pa (Buddhakapal), gsin-rje (Yam), et cetera.

(6) The Dharmapals:

Subordinate to the tutelary deities are the Ch'os-skyon (the Dharmapals). They are depicted in the most hideous manner with fierce and dreadful appearance. The Brahminic fiend Bhairav might have given rise to the concept of Dharmapal in the Mahayan Buddhism.

(7) The Dakkinis:

The Dakkinis are the female counter parts of the Dharmapals. It is presumed that the Dakkinis are the metamorphosed adaptation of the Hindu goddess Kali.

(8) The Brahminic deities:

Numerous Brahminic gods have also been admitted in the Mahayan pantheistic system. These may be roughly defined under eight categories as the lha (Devata), the klu (Nag or serpent), the gNod-sbyin (Yaksh genii), the dri-za(Gandharv or angel),the lha-ma-yin (Asur or titan), the namk'ah-ldin (Garud or phoenix), the mi-ham-chi (Kinnar or the celestial singer), the to-'bye-ch'en-po (Mahoragor the great reptiles), et cetera.

(9) The Local Gods:

The local gods are mostly of the pre-Buddhist Bon origin. These were admitted into the Tibetan Buddhism in the process of pantheistic syncretism as the deities of lower level.

(10) Family and Personal Gods:

Like the local gods, the family and personal gods were also given place in the Mahayan pantheistic system. Most of these are the pre-Buddhist autochthonous deities of the Bon or local origin. These deities also occupy subordinate position in the pantheistic hierarchy as the Defenders of Faith.

Iconology

The Buddhist art cannot be properly understood or appreciated unless the meanings of its symbols, which form its bedrock, are properly comprehended. The canonical interpretation of these symbols may unfold the latent secrets of the complex Vajrayanic tantric doctrine, cosmological phenomena and noumenal abstractions. In fact, the Vajrayan Buddhism of Tibet is so abstruse a creed that its complexities can only be properly explained and appreciated after these are rendered

into the formal mediums through the diverse symbolic modes. Most of these symbols, drawn from the Indian Vajrayan Buddhist sources, have undergone significant metamorphism and modification to suit the tantric bias of its Tibetan version. Besides, many more quintessential symbols have been added to it.

All deities of the Vajrayan pantheon have been given a definite iconographic character through the symbolic modes. The moods, attitudes, sitting postures, hand gestures, number of faces and arms, costumes, attributes, colors, et cetera are not only the characterizing symbols of the virtues, faculties and potentialities conferred on the different deities through the mystic and meditative processes, but the sesymbolic modes also identify them with their respective parivars (families). Thus, each element of an icon is important and meaningful for its symbolic value, and the whole icon is a grand composite symbol of a specific cosmic phenomenon, tantric system, philosophical idea and an abstract concept.

In iconography, the Buddha is depicted as a mendicant, with the tonsured hair, clad in the most austere manner in the chogyu (Sanskrit: samghati) (a 2-3 meters long sheet made of 25 pieces of cloth). This representation is a universal symbol of peace, compassion and charity. He is depicted seated on a lotus cushion, which symbolizes purity and divine birth. The expression on his face mirrors divine calmness of the 'mild' form. This expression is also characteristic of the Bodhisattvas, who are the celestial reflexes of the Buddha. However, unlike the mendicant Buddha, the celestial Bodhisattvas are portrayed like the youthful Indian princes. They are depicted dressed in the most elaborate manner and bedecked with the thirteen types of ornaments to symbolize their celeste eminence or the rajasik (royal) temperament. Thus, the variation in mood, attitude, sitting posture, hand gesture, costume, attribute, et cetera may represent different roles of the same deity. For example, Bodhisattva Manjushri, in his popular compassionate disposition and attired in the regal costumes is regarded as a satvik (moderate) deity, but he is portrayed as rDo-rje hJhigs-byed (Vajra Bhairv) in his tamsik (fierce) aspect.

The tamsik temperament is characteristic of the drag-pa (the fierce deities). They are the protectors of tantric doctrine. In the iconography, they are represented with large heads, third eye on the foreheads, bulky bodies, thorny hairs, aggressive gestures, et cetera. A drag-pa is identical to the to-wa (the angry deity), but each of the former is characterized by a string of skulls around the 'flaming tongue' and is shown trampling on the prostrate body. Although looking menacing, none of these is demonic. In fact, the more merciful and compassionate the deity is; the more awesome is his fierce aspect. The awe-inspiring appearance is intended to subdue and vanquish the forces inimical to the dharma.

The deities are represented in different sitting or standing attitudes. These attitudes mainly serve to accentuate different moods and amplify the effect of compassion or otherwise of the subject. The female deities are usually portrayed with the twists at the waist and neck levels to describe the dvi-bhang (double-twist) and the tri-bhang (triple-twist) postures to impart an effect of physical grace and linear harmony. However, this rule is deliberately set aside and the figures of fierce deities are made grotesque, stiff and menacing to represent awe and terror.

The most favorite sitting posture for the Buddhas in iconography is the rdorje skyil-drunor the vajrasan (the diamond or the adamantine posture). It is a well-known Buddha posture, in which the legs are firmly locked with the soles shown fully upwards. This posture symbolizes changelessness. When one sits in vajrasan with the unlocked hands loosely resting in the lap, the posture is called dhyanasan (the meditative posture). The other notable sitting postures and their symbolic significance are the satvasan that symbolizes maiden emergence from meditation,

the nyamapalanasan represents a meditative stage next to satvasan, the lalitasan symbolizes eminence, charm and bliss, and the Maitrey's asana suggests ever-preparedness.

The role of hand gestures has been the most important mode of symbolical expression. Various forms of hand gestures have been prescribed to express different moods, actions and achievements of the Buddha. Each of his hand gestures has been regarded as a standard mode for expressing a particular mood, action or situation. Some of the important hand gestures are:

(1) The bhumisparsha-mudra (the 'earth-touching' gesture). It is the most common one to represent the Buddha in iconography. This epitomizes the this-worldly essence of the Buddhs's philosophy, and symbolizes his victory over Mar. The celestial Buddha Akshobhya is depicted in this gesture.

(2) The samadhi-mudra (the meditative gesture) symbolizes an equanimous attitude.

(3) The uttarabodhi-mudra represents higher consciousness. The celestial Buddha Vairochan is depicted in this mudra.

(4) The dharmchakra-mudra or dharmchakrapravartan-mudra symbolizes the Buddha as the Preacher of dharma.

(5) The vardahast-mudra symbolizes charity. The celestial Buddha Ratnasambhav is depicted in this gesture.

(6) The sharan-mudra symbolizes the refuge-giving attitude. This gesture is identical to the vardahast-mudra, but with the arm slightly bent and the palm pendant.

(7) The abhay mudra symbolizes granting fearlessness. This mudra is associated with the celestial Buddha Amoghasiddhi.

In iconography, the Jins (the spiritual fathers of Bodhisattvas) are generally shown seated on the head in the hair. The image of Avalokiteshvar at Trilokinath and Gondhala (Gandhola) in the Chandra-Bhaga Valley of Himachal Pradesh are examples to the point. There, the celestial Buddha Amitabh is depicted on the crown of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvar. How this formula was adopted into the Hindu iconography in the later period may best be illustrated from the life-size stone images of Jay and Vijay at Lakhamandal [6, p. 119. pls. 106-107].

At times, the surmounting Jins are symbolized by their mystic emblems. Thus, Vairochan is symbolized by acharka; Akshobhya by a vajra; Ratnasambhav by a ratna; Amitabh by a rakta-padm and Amoghasiddhi by a vishwa-vajra. These symbols are shown on the crowns of the respective Bodhisattvas. Sometimes, the Bodhisattvas are depicted holding those symbols as their attributes.

With the rise of Tantrism, the Vajrayan Buddhist deities were endowed with the numerous faculties, which came to be expressed in iconography by the increased number of faces and arms. Thus, various deities were given multi-headed and multi-armed forms. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvar, the most popular deity of the Himalayan Buddhism, has been pompously represented in the four-headed or eleven-headed form, with thousand hands with open palms, having an open eye on each. The extra heads of Avalokiteshvar signify his concern for the welfare of living beings and the thousand hands with open eyes symbolize his watchful and benevolent disposition.

The colors also carry great symbolic significance in the Buddhist art. Yellow represents a satvik (moderate) mood and the red, blue and black signifies the tamasik (fierce) mood. As a rule, the gods are depicted white; the goblins, red and the demonic characters black. This color-symbolism is very similar to the traditional Indian concept, classical and folk. The colors, when identified with the Jins (the celestial Buddhas), symbolize five cosmic elements. Thus, white is for space, blue for air, yellow for earth, red for fire and green for water.

Certain monograms and motifs, made into the composite monograms to represent different Buddhist divinities, have also acquired considerable sanctimonious significance to symbolize events, causal nexuses and canonical abstractions. The rNam-bcu-dbang-ldan (the Ten Mighty Ones) is one of such mystic monograms depicted on the cho-pen (the luck-flags). This monogram is a combination of seven letters and motifs to represent moon, sun and a flame. Different parts of the monogram are printed blue, black, green, red, white and yellow.

The sDon-br TsonDam-pa is one of the most popular composite motifs, which epitomizes the entire gamut of the Himalayan Buddhist creed. This composite motif, painted or block-printed on paper or cloth, is not only found in the monasteries, but in all Buddhist houses. In it, the three patrons of the religion are represented symbolically. Accordingly, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom is represented by Ser-phying-gyi-gLegs-bam (the Book of Wisdom) and ral-gri (the Flaming Sword). Vajrapani, the Bodhisattva of Power is symbolized by ne-Tso (the twin-headed green parrot). Avalokiteshvar, the Bodhisattva of Compassion is represented by Ngang-pa Ser-pa (the twin-headed orange duck). This Buddhist 'Trinity' of the Wisdom, Power and Compassion is invoked for proficiency in the action, speech and thought.

Another sDon-br Tson Dam-pa also signifies the epoch-making event: the spread of Buddhism in Tibet. In this mystic monogram, Shantarakshit is represented by an ocean, the lotus symbolises the 'lotus-born' Guru Padmasambhav, the long Tibetan book with a sword represents the Dharma king Trisong Detsen, the two-headed orange duck is the symbolical of the great Indian sage Vimlamitra and the other Indianscholars, the two-headed green parrot represents Vairochan and other learned translators.

The significant-most monograms of the Mahayan Buddhism is the pictorial representation of the Srid-pahih Khor-lo (the Wheel of Life). This grand motif is regarded mandatory on the wall beside the main door of the lha-khang (temple). According to the tradition, the Wheel of Life was first drawn by the Buddha himself with the grains of rice. The earliest version of this motif appears on one of the caves at Ajanta [1, p. 309]. It was introduced in Tibet by an Indian monk Bande Yashe in the 8th century at the Samya monastery in Pod (central Tibet) [5, pp. 165-166; 7, p. 108]. This imposing circular monogram represents the cyclic causal nexus through an elaborate matrix of symbolic devices and motifs drawn in twelve oval frames of the rim. The mGon-po Nag-po, that is, the Mahakal or the Great Time, represented as an all-pervading terrific monster, is shown gripping firmly the rim in his powerful jaws and paws. The nave contains a cock, a snake and a pig, each attempting to devour the other, symbolizing the rag (lust), the dvesh (jealousy) and the moh (greed) respectively. Each of these figures is colored red, green and black respectively. The main field is filled up to symbolize six spheres of life, that is, the spheres of gods, the sphere of humankind, the abode of titans, the sphere of ghosts, the sphere of hell and the sphere of beasts. The Wheel of Life is so compendious a symbol of the Buddhist art that it can explain the subtlest aspects of the Buddhist philosophy in a most appealing and effective manner.

Iconographic process

The iconographic process of Buddhist art is very intricate and complex. Having remained standardized through ages under strict adherence to the canons, it has discouraged any attempt towards thematic novelty, innovation and creative imagery. Through years of strenuous apprenticeship under his master, the novice is fully trained to follow what has been taught to him. Thus, a process of unaltered reproduction of the age-old themes has continued until date. Even when a novice himself becomes proficient, he never aspires to be original, but feels content

to faithfully follow the beaten track. Thus, any effort towards individualistic expression is completely excluded from the work, which must conform to the formative and normative canonical requirements. Nevertheless, the artist is free to 'create' his own 'theme' if he has attained spiritual and intellectual faculties to envision, conceptualize and interpret an abstraction, but even then, he has to follow strictly the canonical regulations and parameters.

Therefore, the formalization of an image may not be a creative process, but a highly spiritual exercise. According to Maitreyanath, proficiency in the representational arts, besides the astrology, medicines, grammar and rhetoric, is one of the essentialities for an ordained monk. For, 'without bringing to mastery the five fields of knowledge even the Supremely Holy Ones will not attain a State of Buddhahood' [2, p. 60]. The canonical bias of Buddhist art has made it highly intellectual, meditational and rigid, but least aesthetic. Therefore, to appreciate this 'art', it is essential to understand its spiritual essence and the symbology, because it is not an end by itself, but a 'tool' to realize the spiritual end. Thus, it may aptly be defined as the 'representational art'. The Vinay prescribes detailed instructions regarding the measurements, designs and treatment of different elements in the representational art. Even so, great emphasis is given to the canonical accuracy of the figures of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Great Mothers, wrathful Yakshas and other human forms.

In the beginning, the iconographic formula for the depiction of Vajrayanic pantheon was based on the Indian navtal (nine-span) system. According to that system, an ideal normal standing human figure is nine spans tall if measured by his own thal-rno, or tal or span-unit, that is, the distance between the tips of thumb and index finger of an outstretched hand. This also is the distance between the hairline and chin. Thus, the face is one span-unit in length. One span-unit is equal to twelve angulis (finger unit). One anguli (Tibetan: sar-mo) is equal to four legs (Tibetan: kang-pa) and one legequals two barley grains (Tibetan: ne).

Since that system was introduced from India into Tibet through Nepal, it came to be called bal-bris, thatis, the Nepalese style. According to that system, the standing human figure measures nine spans in height. Each of these spans represents one division of the cosmos. Thus, a perfect human figure of the nineпspans is considered to epitomize the macrocosm into a microcosmic replica. Therefore, the rupakaya of the Buddha in the navtal scale is idealized as the symbol of macrocosm. This relationship is important, for it follows the philosophical tenet of the interdependent origination of entities, and explains the concept of nirvana as a transitory phase, through which a finite 'blows out' into infinite.

The Indian navtal system was made elaborate in Tibet under the tantric influence. Later, under the Chinese iconographic influence, it underwent certain changes, but all those changes remained confined only to the formal treatment of the deities of local origin. Even so, the Indian navtal system continued to be superseded by the Chinese and local iconographic practices until Tibetan art developed quintessential qualities that made it look different from the Indian or the Chinese styles as the dbUs-bris, that is, the Tibetan art-style. The Indian iconographic norms continued to be the standard for an ideal human figure even in that situation. The increase from that standard signified the superhuman faculties and decrease, the subhuman traits of the subject.

Under the Tibetan iconographic system, the images are created on different span-measures, ranging between ten span and six span units according to the status of the subject in the pantheistic hierarchy. Any deviation from that rule is considered a sinful infringement. Thus, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and saints are depicted in the ten-span measure, but for the Buddhas, one span-unit measures twelve-and-half sar-mo against the usual twelve sar-mo. Thus, the height of an image of the Buddha from the topknot to the sole and the width between the tips of middle fingers of the

hands of the outstretched arms describe a square of 125 sar-moor the ten spans of the twelve-and-half sar-mo. For the Buddha portrayed in sitting position, the iconographic norms for the upper portion shall be the same as for the standing figure, but for the lower part, grids have been prescribed by meticulous computation of the measurements so that the proportion of each part of body is not disturbed.

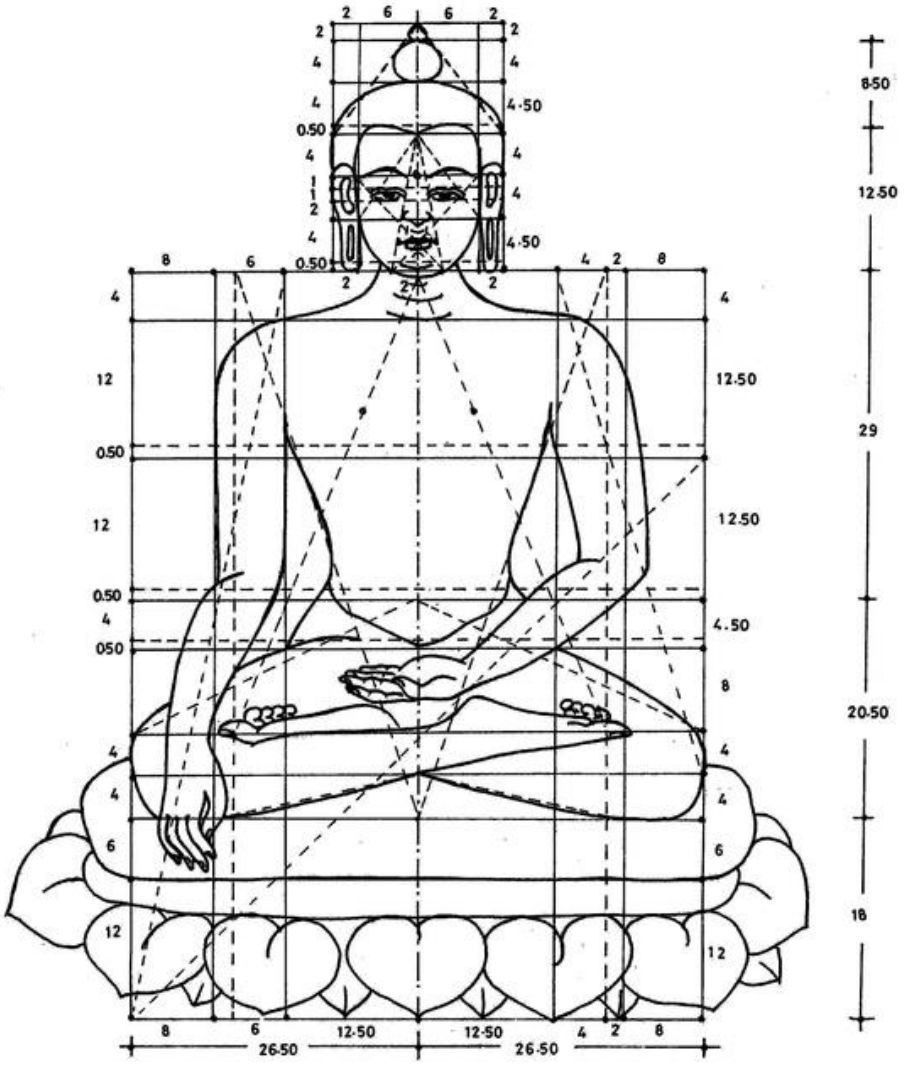

Fig. 2. Iconometric norms of the Buddha image.

The measurements for the images of different subjects provide that the Buddhas and deified lamas should be of the 125 sar-mo; the Bodhisattvas, the Lokapals and local deities of the 120 sar-mo; the female characters of the 108 sar-mo; the wrathful deities, Dharmpals, Yakshs, et cetera of the 96 sar-mo and the dwarf deities of the 72 sar-mo.

Although the canons are rigid and infallible about the depiction of figures to the fixed iconographic norms, yet the artist may deviate from the canonical norms for the non-human depictions. He may create picturesque landscapes with cliffs, crags, waterfalls, gardens, fruiting and flowering trees, animals, birds, clouds, et cetera of his liking. Because, all those non-human pictorial elements are of the non-Indian origin, we do not come across any norm about the depiction of those elements. Those crept into the Himalayan (Tibetan) Buddhist art from the Chinese sources.

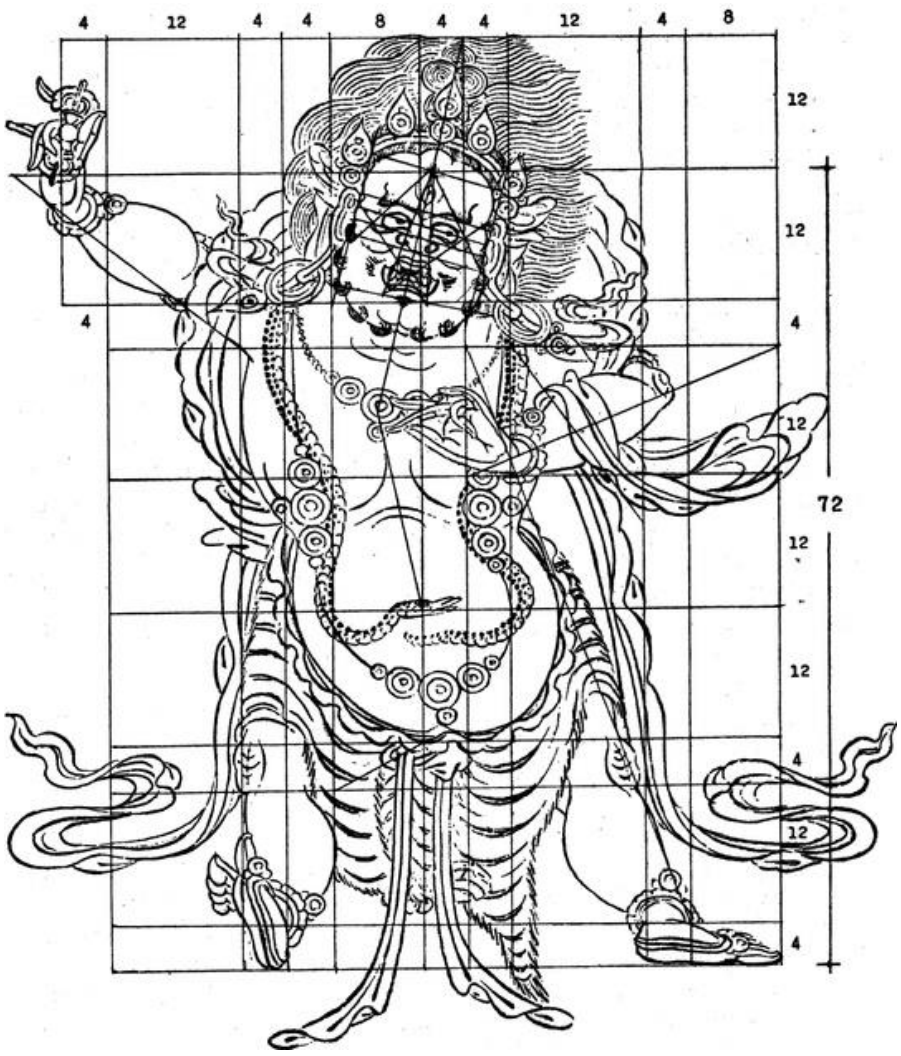

Fig. 3. Iconometric scale of wrathful deitiesi.

Having discussed the thematic, iconological and iconographic aspects of the Himalayan Buddhist art, we now come to the visual and plastic mediums through which it is given the formal expression. Among the visual mediums, the murals are the foremost, followed by the thangkas. Among the plastic mediums, the stuccos are the important ones, and then the metallic images.

The murals

The history of mural painting in the Tibetan Buddhist world has been relatively an unexplored subject. Nevertheless, evidences are there to suggest that the mural painting, as an organic component of the monastic structure, was introduced into Tibet from India in the early eighth century by Bande Yeshe, an Indian monk-artist at the instance of Padmasambhav. He painted a colossal Srid-pahi hKhor-lo (the Wheel of Life) in the vestibule of chief temple to the left of the door in the Samya monastery [5, pp. 172-173; 7, p. 108]. He also might have been one of the pioneer monk-architects who supervised construction of the Samya monastery. The Srid-pahi hKhor-lo was an essential part of the organic whole of a monastery in India since the earliest times, as is borne out from one of the caves at Ajanta, where this theme is painted. That concept was continued in the structural monasteries of later period in the eastern India. The important fact in the present context is that through the 'Wheel of Life', a gradual development of art from the earliest age to its structural formulation can be traced and the development of wall painting as

a national art-style visualized. Therefore, the development of religious architecture in Tibet was not only an introduction of a structural concept, but it was also marked the beginning of a distinct art-style in the form of mural painting. All the temples built in the Tibetan Buddhist world since the founding of Samya monastery followed that practice scrupulously, and carried the 'Wheel of Life' and other Buddhist themes on the walls and ceilings as an integral and organic part of the monastic architecture.

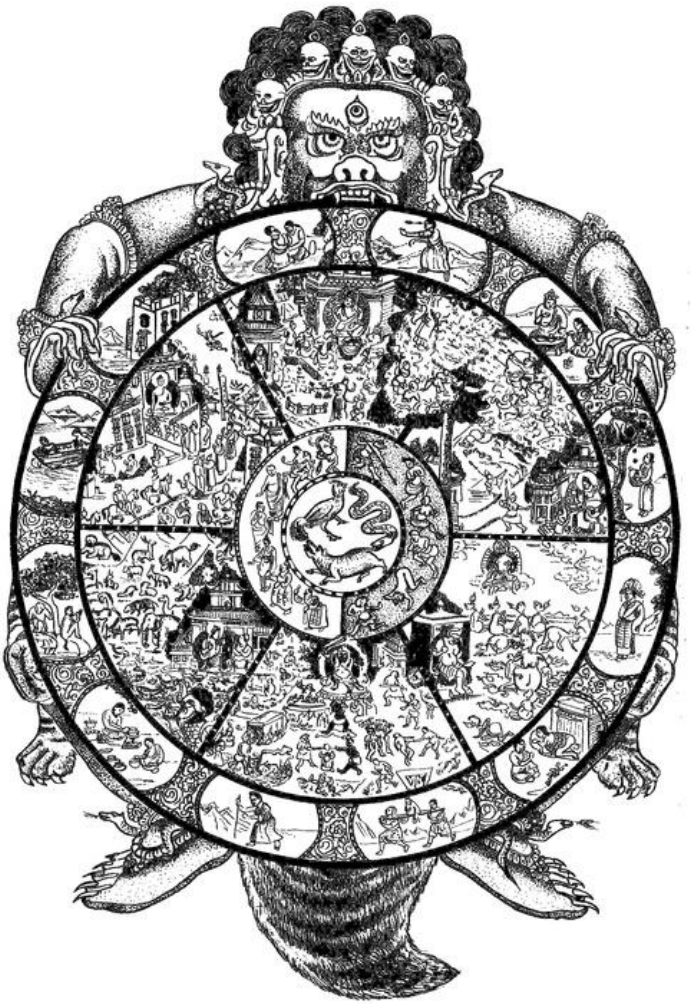

Fig. 4. The Buddhist wheel of life.

The wall painting in the Buddhist Himalayan region is exclusively done in the tempera technique. However, the monk-artists here have been devising their own quintessential technique of preparing the pigments and surface. To prepare the surface, generally a thin paste of gypsum or lime and yak-skin glue is applied. In some cases, even butter is used. The surface is then burnished to the shining finish. That process is repeated several times to ensure flawless smoothness. After that, the surface is divided into the manageable grids; the drafting work is done with pencil or black ink. Sometimes, the artist also uses perforated sheepskin stencils for oft-repeated subjects, but use of stencil is rare for the murals. The artists largely improvise colors from the mineral and vegetable sources. In certain cases, even gold dust has also been liberally used in the murals. Besides the walls, painting in the monasteries has also been done on the underside of the wooden ceilings, wooden pillars, beams, etcetera. However, in the monasteries built lately with the modern construction materials, the painters have been liberally using readymade synthetic and chemical colors. They have

also been painting themes on the large canvases and flex sheets cut to size, and pasting those on the walls.

After the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 and the establishment of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's order-in-exile in 1960 at McLeodganj in Dharmsala, many monasteries belonging to the different sects of the Tibetan Buddhism and of the pre-Buddhist Bon religion have come upat various places in the Himalayan region. Most of these monasteries built with the modern construction materials have plain interiors, with the walls painted in flat synthetic colors, mostly reds and yellows. Nevertheless, a few of these may be seen profusely embellished with the wall paintings, but none of these is executed in the traditional style to be defined as the murals. These paintings executed on the cement-plastered walls with the synthetic enamel colors are widely at variance in treatment and style from the traditional Tibetan murals. Although, the monk-artists, who executed these paintings have taken all care to preserve the thematic and stylistic sanctity of the Tibetan art, yet the offensively glossy and flamboyant effect of the synthetic enamels and the Indian bazaar style have gravely polluted the sublime serenity of the traditional art style. Under that influence, the depictions tend to be only the laudatory poster paintings, lacking the nostalgic charm.

The thangkas

The tradition of patta-chitra (cloth painting) has been very ancient in India among different religious sects for the propagation of their sectarian teachings among the masses through the audile and visual media. Among those, the Jain and Buddhist preachers figure prominently. It has been a common practice among the religious preachers to carry rolled up patta-chitra with them on their missions.

When the Buddhism was introduced in Tibet by the Indian missionary-scholars, they must have carried the patta-chitra with them so that they could create awareness among the illiterate masses, because there was no other effective means available to them in that unfamiliar and strange country. Obviously the patta-chitra was the only effective mode with which they could reach the people. Therefore, that medium played a very significant role in the spread of dharma among the illiterate masses, because for them the visual narration was far more appealing and effective than the oral preaching that they could hardly understand. As expected, great importance was attached in Tibet to the patta-chitra. That medium gradually developed into a highly sophisticated form as the thangka, that is, the 'rolled up' painting by imbibing influences from the regional Indian art-styles of Nepal and West Bengal. However, the tantric bias of Vajrayan Buddhism completely transformed the complexion of thangka, and in its changed version, it stood completely apart from its Indian archetype. It was conceived to be a veritable mandal by itself and its preparation, selection of theme and consecration was all regulated by the canons to make it efficacious. Later, the Chinese art-style and technique also considerably influenced it in various manners. Under that influence, the thangkas also came to be very meticulously embroidered with the multicolored silken threads, and even the programmed and machine-embroidered stereotype thangkas are now available. However, what is relevant for us here is the traditional way of making it.

To start with, an oblong piece of white cotton cloth is hemmed around the thin bamboo struts to ensure soft stiffening. The 'job' is then stretched on an improvised rectangular frame by a strong chord running in a zigzag manner around the canvas and the frame. The ends of chord are kept manipulative to ensure optimum working tension. A thin coat of the mixture of the diluted lime and yak-skin glue is then applied on the stretched cloth. The surface is later burnished smooth for drawing.

Fig. 5. A thangka artist at work.

The canvas is first divided into the grids. The outline of figure is then marked with the pencil or black ink. When, a number of copies of a particular theme are required, a perforated stencil is used and the outlines are made by sifting charcoal powder on to the canvas. The artist does not bother for the details at this stage, which he attempts later with the delicate brushwork. The brushes were traditionally made by the artist himself from the fine hairs of goat and wild animals, but now normal brushes form the market are used. An artist usually makes his own colors by grinding different kinds of colored stones, which are amply available locally. Some colours are also obtained from the arboreal sources. The golden color was earlier obtained from the gold dust that the artists used to prepare themselves. However, of late readymade poster and watercolors, and even the acrylic paints, are being freely used by the lama painters and the lay artists to meet the booming demand of the curio-market in India and abroad for the thangkas.

The thangka, when completed, is disengaged from the easel and the strutting removed. The me-long (painted canvas) is then sewn to a colored silk or brocade ribbon on all sides. In order to facilitate proper display, two round wooden rods are attached to it, one at the top, called thang-shing; and the other at the bottom, called thang-thog. The thangka is always required to be rolled from the bottom upwards. A hJah-Tshon (rainbow) is provided around the thangka proper, that is, the painted surface, to symbolize a barrier between the sacred realm of the thangka proper and the profane world outside, similar to the provision of sima (boundary wall) around a monastery. The rainbow is usually tri-colored: red, yellow and blue. At the bottom of a proper thangka, a brocade patch, on which sky-dragon is embroidered, is fixed to suggest thang-sgo (an entrance) to the sacred realm. In order to protect the thangka from the dust, smoke, dirt, et cetera, a zhal-khebs (silken veil) is provided over it. Thus, a thangka is a veritable portable celestial realm that enshrines different Vajrayan Buddhist deities.

Stuccoes

How and when did the art of making three-dimensional realistic images develop in the Tibetan Buddhist world may not be precisely known. It may reasonably be assumed that there might have remained a very ancient practice of making crude totemic images of stone, wood and other organic materials under the Bon traditions, but none of those should have been realistic or sophisticated. However, the recorded literary and tangible evidences confirm that the central Tibetan kingdom

under its powerful king Songtsen Gampo (CE 617-649) had been receiving wholesome scholastic and artistic influences from Kashmir, China, Nepal and the Indian mainland. He not only sent Thomi Sambhot to India through Kashmir in CE 632 to acquire scriptural knowledge for his kingdom, but also evinced keen interest in the Buddhism through his Nepalese wife Bhrikuti and the Chinese wife Kong-jo Wencheng. The introduction of the Indian art tradition in Tibet may evidently be attributed to him.

However, no definite evidence to indicate existence of stucco images prior to the 10th century is known in Tibet or the rest of Buddhist Himalayan region. Under the patronage of King Lhachen Yeshe-O (c. CE 967-1040), the Great Lotsab Rinchen Sangpo had invited thirty-two artisans from Kashmir to embellish the monasteries and temples that he founded at various places in Ngaris (western Tibet). Among those artisans, the name of one Bhidhik figures prominently as an accomplished image-maker. He is also known to have made an image of Avalokiteshvar for Rinchen Sangpo, which the latter installed at Go-khar in Guge in CE 999 [4, p. 70]. Those Kashmiri artisans were the image-makers in various mediums, like stone, wood, etcetera, but making stuccoes from papier-mâché must have been their forte, as may be revealed from the preponderance of stuccoes in most of the monasteries of that age. Otherwise, also, Gandhar-Kashmir had age-old tradition of making the colossal stuccos. The colossal Buddha stuccoes of Bamiyan are the glorious examples to trace the antiquity of that tradition [3, pp. 72-74].

The iconographic principles for preparing the plastic images are in no way different from the ones prescribed for painting. According to the monastic canons, a plastic image is a picture projected in depth so that the circumference of a plastic image measures three times the width of the painted one. That consideration set deeply in the minds of monks; they have never been able to reach the level excellence in the plastic images as they did in the murals and thangkas. Image making in plastic mediums involves greater technical skill, which the monks and the deeply religious lay artisans have rarely been able to achieve.

The plastic images are made in different ways. The most popular among those are the stuccoes, made freestanding or in bas relief. The images may be made of the miniature sizes in bas relief for the votive purpose as the tsa-tsa, or the three-dimensional freestanding of the heroic and life-size in different postures according to the requirement. To make stucco, the medium, which may be papier-mâché, clay, sattu-dough or dhoop according to the requirement, is pressed into the mould and the positive impression taken on it. It is then allowed to dry. When sufficiently dry, a thin priming coat of the mixture of lime and yak-skin glue is applied on it. It is then painted in bright colors. For the larger stucco, an armature of bamboo or wooden struts and props is prepared. Over that 'inner structure', the precast stuccoed limbs of the body are carefully fixed and jointed. The complete stucco is then primed with the solution of lime and yak-skin glue. When dry, the stucco is finished and painted. A rich collection of such heroic and life-size stuccoes may be seen in many monasteries in the entire Buddhist Himalaya. The ritual masks used in monastic dances are also made in similar manner in the papier-mâché.

The use of wood and stone as the sculptural medium has not been popular in the Buddhist Himalayan region, possibly because neither the good quality wood nor good quality stone has been available. Only isolated examples of rdo-sku (stone images) and sin-sku (wooden images) are found here and there in the monasteries.

Metallic images

The art of making metal images has remained the monopoly of Newari masters of Nepal and of the metal image-makers of Bhutan. They inherited this art from the image-makers and metal-casters of the Pal atelier of Bengal. The Tibetan image-makers learned this art from the Newari and Kashmiri image-makers. We have already noted the contribution of Kashmiri image-makers a short while earlier. Thus, the art of image making that flourished in the Tibetan Buddhist world blends two Indian art traditions: the Pal art traditions and the Kashmiri art traditions.

The most common method of metal casting in Tibet and neighboring regions has been the madhuchchishtavidhan, that is, the cire-perdue or the lost-wax process. This technique offers two alternatives: (I) the hollow casting and (II) the solid casting.

For the hollow casting, an image is very carefully shaped in bee-wax, very thinly spread over the clay core. When all the desired details have been developed on the wax, it is covered with the successive layers of clay. To ensure that the inner clay-core is not displaced from its position when the wax is removed, clay 'pegs' are inserted at various points. The 'job' is then left to dry in the shade. After it is completely dry, it is gently heated to extract wax through the holes left for that purpose in the outer clay-shell at the top-end of the 'job'. Thereafter, the cavity so created is carefully filled with the molten brass or bronze or any other metal by keeping the 'job' upside down so that the molten metal may rise from the base towards the head. It is then left to cool, after which the shell is broken and the core removed.

In case of solid casting, the figure is entirely made of bee-wax without any clay-core so that, when the bee-wax is extracted from the 'job', the shell is completely hollow. The remaining operation is similar to the hollow casting. At times, the vital parts, like hands, face, et cetera are cast separately and later jointed to the main body.

At times, repoussé or the sheet-pressing method is also adopted to prepare figures. However, this method is mostly employed to prepare pedestals for the images. Repoussé is the most common technique for making the musical instruments, sacramental artefacts, utensils, et cetera.

The metal images prepared by different methods, are finished by removing blemishes and then gilded, if desired. For gilding, different techniques have been in use, ranging from the lacquer fixing to the amalgam technique. In the lacquer fixing technique, a very thin coating of the red lacquer is applied on the image, over which a micro-thin layer of gold leaf is applied. The gold leaf sticks to the metal surface giving a rich effect of shining gold. Wooden images have also been given a golden touch by this technique. However, that practice is rare. Of late, the chemical method of gilding has become popular. Under this technique, the image is first treated in nitric acid and then warmed and rubbed over with mercury. This treatment produces an amalgam, over which a thin gold leaf is spread and the image subjected to high temperature that permanently fixes the gold layer to the base. Then, the piece is polished and finished to give a bright effect.

No image can be considered worthy of worship unless it is enlivened through an elaborate soul-infusing ritual. For that purpose, the pancha-ratna (five noble metals), consecrated grains of rice, a scroll containing the sacred formulae, et cetera are placed inside the image through an opening left for that purpose at the base. The whole operation has to be accomplished under the supervision of an accomplished lama. This opening is called the zun-zhug, that is, the entrance or the charm-place. Thereafter, the zun-zhug is firmly closed by welding a metal sheet over it. After that, the image is worthy of being installed on the altar. It has become refulgent and alive.

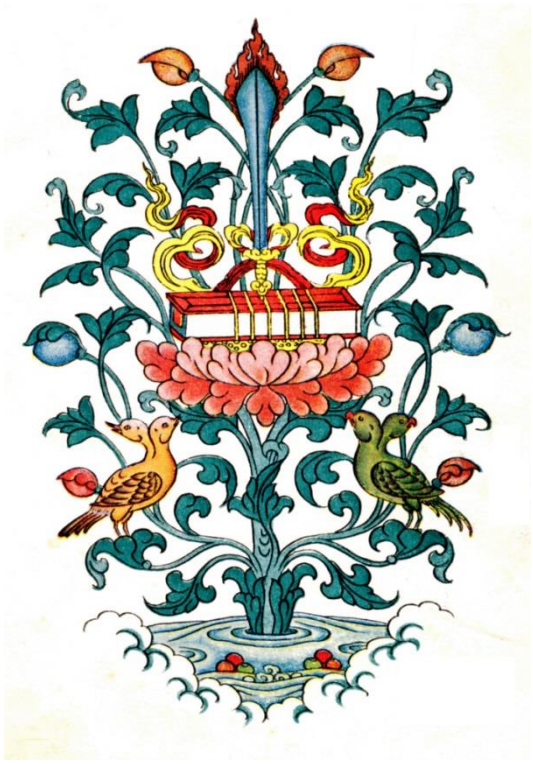

Fig. 6. A Buddhist composite lucky monogram.

Fig. 7. White Tara, a thangka painting done by Kelsang Lodoe at the Namgyal monastery, Dharmsala.

Fig. 8. A heroic stucco of Maha Vairochan at Tabo (Himachal Pradesh).

Fig. 9. White Tara, brass hollow casting, the Jonangpa monastery, Sanjauli (Himachal Pradesh)

Fig. 10. Early Buddha image, bronze from Nagar.

Living in the most elevated and one of the starkest regions on the earth, where literally there is nothing but faith to live by, the Himalayan Buddhist people are physically, mentally and spiritually deeply steeped into the essence of dharma expressed through the Buddhist ecclesiastic art and its deep symbology. Under the sublime influence of that art, they are the most relaxed, contented, peace-loving, self-effacing, divinely spiritual and paradisiacal innocent people on the earth despite all biophysical adversities piled against them. Each of them is truly the Pratyek Buddha (individual Buddha). It is this overwhelming faith of these people in the Buddhist ecclesiastic art that I feel impelled to define it as the Buddhist Classic folk Art.

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