

PRESS RELEASE

“AWAKEN: A TIBETAN BUDDHIST JOURNEY
TOWARD ENLIGHTENMENT”
PRESENTS A PATH TO CLARITY
OUT OF THE CHAOS

EXHIBITION OPENS AT THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
ON MARCH 12, 2021



Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment
March 12, 2021–January 3, 2022
Organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
Curated for the Rubin Museum of Art by Elena Pakhoutova

NEW YORK, NY, December 15, 2020 — **The Rubin Museum of Art** invites visitors to unplug and discover the possibility to free their minds with “**Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment**,” opening March 12, 2021. Organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, this traveling exhibition guides visitors on a journey toward enlightenment, showcasing the power of Tibetan Buddhist art to focus and refine awareness, and highlighting the inextricable relationship between artistic endeavor and spiritual practice in Tibetan Buddhism. The exhibition has been re-imagined and adapted for the Rubin Museum’s galleries and features 35 traditional objects, including 14 from the Rubin Museum’s collection, with two contemporary works by Nepal born, Tibetan American artist Tsherin Sherpa. “Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment” will be on view March 12, 2021, to January 3, 2022.

“The title ‘Awaken’ references the word ‘Buddha,’ which means ‘awake,’” says Rubin Museum Curator of Himalayan Art Elena Pakhoutova. “To be awake is to see the full picture of existence: to understand that all things are ever-changing and interconnected, and that nothing exists by itself. By recognizing this, we can begin to glimpse at what an awakened state of mind is.”

The exhibition introduces the central teachings of Tibetan Buddhism as visitors progress through ten milestones on the journey from the chaos of ordinary life to the awakened states of awareness. At the entrance, visitors encounter a video collage reflecting our fragmented, overstimulated contemporary world. It echoes the main idea in Tsherin Sherpa’s abstracted 16-panel painting *Luxation 1* (2016), which presents a split, incomplete view of a deity. From the start, the exhibition points to a central question: are we truly awake? Or are we lulled asleep by the ordinary world’s clamor and therefore blind to the true nature of reality and destined to suffer? As a way out of the chaos, the show presents a path of transformation facilitated by Tibetan Buddhist art in which the practitioner progresses toward awareness and enlightenment with the help from a guide, allies, and a map.

“Awaken” will feature works from the 7th to 21st centuries including stone, wood, and metal sculptures, traditional Tibetan hanging scroll paintings, illuminated manuscript pages, and vibrant contemporary pieces drawn largely from the collections of the Rubin Museum of Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Select loans from the Newark Museum, Shelley and Donald Rubin private collection, and Beata and Michael McCormick private collection complement the exhibition.

In addition to the contemporary painting by Sherpa, highlights include a 9th- to 10th-century stone sculpture from eastern India of the seated Buddha at the moment of his awakening; a monumental, fearsome five-hundred-year-old sculpture of the Destroyer of Death (Vajrabhairava), who symbolizes the overcoming of our deepest fears; a flaming skull trident from 18th-century Tibet of a guardian deity held in triumph over death; an intricate 17th- to 18th-century mandala painting, which is a map to the realm of wisdom’s wrathful emanation, used as a visual aid in contemplation; as well as a 15th-century painting of the Secret Union deities (Guhyasamaja with consort Vajravetali), who symbolize the union of apparent opposites and two qualities necessary for enlightenment: wisdom and compassion.

“Faced with unprecedented global crises, this is a time when we question ourselves and the world around us,” says Elena Pakhoutova. “‘Awaken’ is an invitation for visitors to step away from the noise and get a fresh perspective on the nature of reality. It’s an opportunity to find inspiration in the Buddhist perspective and to perhaps ‘wake up’ from a nightmare.”

Accompanying the exhibition is an audio guide that will be available on *The Rubin* app, and a 225-page catalog published by VMFA, featuring a principal essay by co-curators Dr. Jeffrey Durham, Associate Curator of Himalayan Art, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, and Dr. John Henry Rice, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The catalog includes an essay by Rubin Museum Curator of Himalayan Art Dr. Elena Pakhoutova, as well as contributions from scholars and experts Dr. Katherine Anne Paul, Dr. Alexander von Rospatt, Dr. Eric Huntington, and artist Tsherin Sherpa (with Paul Ferguson), who address the exhibition’s main themes. The catalog is available at the Rubin Museum shop and online at RubinMuseum.org/shop.

Exhibition Credit

“Awaken” was originally curated by John Henry Rice, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Jeffrey Durham, Associate Curator of Himalayan Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Curated for the Rubin Museum of Art by Elena Pakhoutova, Curator of Himalayan Art, Rubin Museum of Art.

“Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment” is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Support

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About the Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art in Chelsea, New York City, explores and celebrates the diversity and uniqueness of Himalayan art, ideas, and cultures across history and into the present. With its globally renowned collection, largely centered around the Tibetan Plateau, the Rubin fosters understanding and appreciation of this region by relating its art and ideas to our shared human experience today. Inspired by the philosophical traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism and aligned with ongoing research into learning, behavior, and the brain, the Rubin offers innovative exhibitions and programs that examine provocative ideas across the arts and explore the mind. Through this work, the Museum serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation, opening windows to inner worlds so visitors can better navigate outer ones. www.RubinMuseum.org

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Image captions:

Vajrabhairava; 15th century or later; Sino-Tibetan; polychromed wood; 53 1/4 x 50 3/4 x 30 3/4 in. (135.3 x 128.9 x 78.1 cm); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation and Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund; 93.13a-oo

Tsherin Sherpa (American, b.1968, Nepal); *Luxation 1*; 2016; acrylic on sixteen stretched cotton canvases; each 18 x 18in. (45.7 x 45.7 cm); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund; 2017.195a-p