

THE ART OF TRANSGRESSION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Fig. 1 Chakrasamvara Mandala; Nepal; ca. 1100; mineral and organic colorants on cotton; Image: 26 1/2 × 19 3/4 in. (67.3 × 50.2 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1995; 1995.233; CC0 – Creative Common (CC0 1.0)

CHAKRASAMVARA MANDALA WITH NEWAR DONORS

Kathmandu Valley, Nepal
ca. 1100

SUMMARY

Professor Jinah Kim discusses sex, death, and enlightenment in a twelfth-century Buddhist mandala—understood to be a spiritual diagram or mind map for visualization. A mandala is a guide of transformation that can help initiates become one with their chosen deity, depicting the result of transformation according to textual and verbal instructions.

This brilliant painting contains a mandala of a powerful tantric Buddhist deity, Chakrasamvara, and his consort, Vajravarahi. Hailing from the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, this painting on cloth, called *paubha* in Newari (the language of Newars, one of the oldest inhabitant groups of the valley), was most likely created around the turn of the twelfth century. A mandala in the most basic sense of the term in Sanskrit means a circle. Imagine a drop of water hitting a calm pond: with the central point of impact and rippling rings, this is easily a core image of a mandala. A mandala is often understood to be a spiritual diagram or a mind map for meditation. In the esoteric or Vajrayana Buddhist ritual practice, a mandala is a tool of transformation that can help an initiate become one with her chosen deity. A painting like this one pictorializes the experience of transformation instructed in textual and verbal sources.¹ A group of ritual texts elaborates on the process of identification with one's chosen deity. One such *sadhana* (literally, accomplishment, propitiation; means of conjuring up a deity), the *Saptaksharasadhana*, or the *sadhana* of the Seven-Syllabled one, describes a form of six-armed Chakrasamvara in sexual embrace with his consort surrounded by the entourage of six yoginis on six spokes of a wheel.² This instruction comes very close to what we see in the central sphere of the painting.

THE MANDALA

Inside a circle bordered by a row of flame and a row of vajras (meaning “thunderbolt,” the quintessential symbol of esoteric teachings, considered indestructible) is a square with four cardinal gateways marked by jewel-studded palatial architecture with prongs

of vajra emerging at the four sides, indicating that the lord of the mandala is situated in the intersection of a double vajra (called *vishvavajra*). This square is divided diagonally, with each cardinal direction marked by four different colors: white, yellow, red, and green, designating east, south, west, and north (clockwise from bottom, which is the eastern direction in the pictorial space).³ A second circle inside the square bordered by a ring of double vajras contains a red lotus with six petals, uniquely shaped as if to help visualize the spokes of a wheel (*chakra*) on which deities emerge. The very center of this lotus-wheel is the third circle of the mandala, the innermost seed, if you will, from which emanates a fantastic vision of the lord of the mandala (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Detail of Chakrasamvara Mandala showing the inner circle; Nepal; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1995; 1995.233; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

With three heads, six arms, holding up a flayed human skin in his uppermost hands and a trident (*trishula*) and a skull-topped staff (*kapalakhavanga*) in his lowermost hands, the dark-blue male deity, Chakrasamvara, embraces his consort with his main arms, his interlocked hands holding a vajra and a bell (*ghanta*). Vajravarahi, also six-armed, ecstatically wraps her right leg around Chakrasamvara's bent thigh, holding in

her left hand, wrapped around his neck, a skull cup and in her right hand, raised in a threatening gesture (*tarjani mudra*, with her index finger held up), a vajra. In her remaining four hands, she holds a bell, a trident, a bow, and an arrow.

As if the human skin dripping blood behind them and the flame around them are not terrifying enough, the couple is also adorned with ornaments made of bones and a garland of severed heads. The couple tramples on two Hindu deities, Bhairava and Kalaratri, in unison while kissing and sharing a drink from the skull cup in Vajravarahi's left hand. The appearance of these two tantric Shaiva deities, Bhairava (a wrathful form of the Hindu god Shiva) and Kalaratri (a dark, bloodthirsty goddess), acknowledges the importance of Shaiva tradition in the development of the Buddhist tantras while articulating the superiority of the Buddhist path. The six yoginis who surround the couple occupying each petal-spoke of the wheel are equally terrifying; all are four-armed, clasp a human skin in their raised hands, and hold a hand drum (*damaru*) and a bell. Between the swaying bells, rattling drums, and snarly flames encircling them, one can almost hear the ecstatic shrills and loud ringing of the bells that would frighten any ordinary human.

THE CHARNEL GROUNDS

This powerful mandala is surrounded by a frightening charnel ground, haunted by jackals and vultures, where those seeking supreme attainment and supernatural powers engaged in transgressive activities. Each corner of the outer space is marked by eight directional deities, or guardians of directions (*dikpala*): three in the top section (Nritti-southwest, Varuna-west, and Vayu-northwest) and five in the bottom section (Yama-south, Agni-southeast, Indra-east, Ishana-northeast, and Kubera-north). Each deity is clearly identifiable by his directional placement and the distinct vehicle or mount (*vahana*).



Fig. 3 Detail of Chakrasamvara Mandala, northeastern corner (top left), showing the charnel ground with Nritti and siddhas and yogis (including Kukkuripa?); Nepal; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1995; 1995.233; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

What is unusual in this painting is how well these deities are integrated into the charnel ground setting: each sits under a tree whose leaves seem to drip with blood. From each tree a head of a figure peeks out, six of them animal-headed, like the mounts of the deities, with two hands holding a dagger and a skull cup. In the top left-hand corner of the painting, Nritti, sitting on a man lying flat, holds a sword and a severed head. Two siddhas (literally, perfected ones, see mahasiddhas below) sit in front of him, exchanging gazes with him. Next to this group are a slender male holding a dog and a slender female adorned with nothing but her bone ornaments. They dance in unison side by side. The dancing male with a dog and his consort alludes to Kukkuripa, one of the canonized mahasiddhas (literally, great perfection, referring to tantric masters who achieved supernatural power and supreme insight). Although such a terrifying backdrop is not described in the *Saptaksharasadhana*, the charnel grounds are the literal

and imagined space in which the *Samvara Tantra* texts, a group of tantric texts that explicate some of the most esoteric Buddhist practices and teachings, arose.

THE HUMAN WORLD

Despite its gruesome contents, at first glance the painting, with its vibrant colors—saturated yellow, green, blue, red, and white—appears almost cheerful. The unnamed Newar artist(s) masterfully executed every line and animated each character of the charnel ground drama with dynamic expressions, postures, and diversely appointed colors. Even the expressions of the deities seem individualized, especially their eyes, adding to the dramatization of the powerful vision.⁴ Among Chakrasamvara mandalas that survive from Nepal and Tibet, this painting is most brilliant in terms of not only its polychromatic qualities but also its articulation of individual characters and components.

Another extraordinary aspect of this painting lies in the depiction of the human world below the mandala (fig. 4). In the left corner of the bottom register, a shaven-headed man in a diaphanous white garment sits cross-legged with ritual implements and offerings in front of him, while two women dressed in fine textiles kneel with their hands folded together with another set of offerings in the far-right corner. Between them are five goddesses: Prajnaparamita in the center with Green Tara (a form known as Dhanada-Tara) and Kurukulla to her right, and Chunda and Vasudhara to her left. Sharing the same flower-strewn red space as the human figures, the five goddesses occupy the human world, as if they were in a shrine space. Although no known textual sources link these five goddesses to the *Chakrasamvara Tantra*, the five color-coded goddesses are the visual and spiritual conduits between the human realm and the transcendent realm of Chakrasamvara.⁵

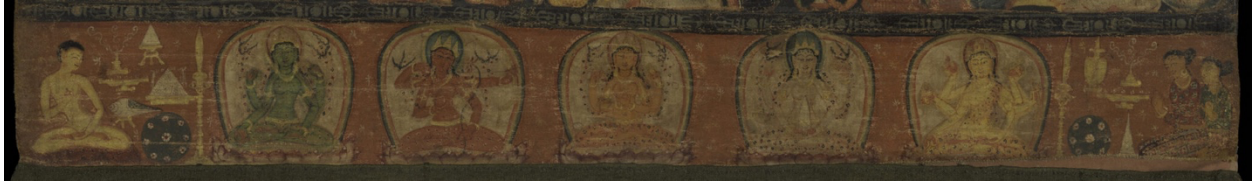


Fig. 4 Detail of Chakrasamvara Mandala, bottom register, showing an esoteric Buddhist practitioner or patron of the Chakrasamvara, two women dressed in fine textiles, and five goddesses; Nepal; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1995; 1995.233; 1995.233; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

The identity of the human figures remains elusive, as no inscription survives. It is possible that the man is related to the women as conjugal partners, especially in the context of the Kathmandu Valley, where the Newar Buddhist system of married householder monks and tantric Buddhist masters (Vajracharyas and Shakyas) developed.⁶ Whatever their relationship, these finely dressed women may have been the sponsors of this exquisite painting.⁷ The man's bare attire is unusual for a Vajracharya, which we expect in this position in a mandala painting.⁸ Is it possible that this painting records his initiation into this special form of Seven-Syllabled Samvara? Inscriptional evidence on surviving Tibetan thangkas of similar age suggests that a painting like this one may have been consecrated as a personal meditation deity.⁹ At least one fourteenth-century Chakrasamvara mandala painting from Nepal suggests that a commemorative ritual for a deceased Vajracharya offered another occasion to commission a painting of the Chakrasamvara mandala.¹⁰ This painting may represent a phase of Newar Buddhism before a strict codification and institutionalization of Vajrayana practices, when personal and individual aspects of esoteric Buddhist practices were tolerated and encouraged in the art of transformation.



Fig. 5 Mandala of the Buddhist Deity Chakrasamvara; Nepal; dated 1490; mineral pigments on cotton cloth; 46 × 34 5/8 in. (116.8 × 87.9 cm); Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum Acquisition Fund; M.73.2.1; photograph © Museum Associates/LACMA, www.lacma.org

FOOTNOTES

¹ In the esoteric Buddhist tradition, the most crucial instruction necessary for one's transformation into the enlightened body is transmitted only within an initiate lineage within a strictly sanctified ritual context. On secrecy, David Gray, "Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the Cakrasamvara Tantra," *Numen* 52, no. 4 (2005): 417–44, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852705775220017>.

² See Iain Sinclair, "Envisioning Durjayacandra's Saptākṣarasādhana: On the Sources and Sponsors of a Twelfth-Century Painting of Seven-Syllabled Saṃvara," in *Himalayan Passages: Tibetan and Newar Studies in Honor of Hubert Decleer*, ed. Benjamin Bogin and Andrew Quintman (Boston: Wisdom, 2014), 205–50.

³ The eastern direction is typically signaled by blue, the color of Akshobhya, the eastern buddha. But in mandalas of the mahayoga and yogini tantras, in which the center is occupied by powerful blue deities, blue and white are swapped in terms of their directionalities. On the mahayoga and yogini tantras, see Harunaga Isaacson, "Tantric Buddhism in India (From A.D. 800 to A.D. 1200)," *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 2 (1998): 23–49.

⁴ The tantric Buddhist iconography became increasingly schematic and canonized in later centuries.

⁵ On the esoteric Buddhist five-color system, see Jinah Kim, *Garland of Visions: Color, Tantra, and a Material History of Indian Painting* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 155–74.

⁶ See David N. Gellner, *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and Its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁷ See Jinah Kim, “Women in Action: Images of Women in the Buddhist Art of Medieval Eastern India and Nepal,” *Orientalis* 51, no. 6 (November/December) (2020): 11–12.

⁸ Iain Sinclair, “Envisioning Durjayacandra’s Saptākṣarasādhana: On the Sources and Sponsors of a Twelfth-Century Painting of Seven-Syllabled Saṃvara,” in *Himalayan Passages: Tibetan and Newar Studies in Honor of Hubert Decler*, ed. Benjamin Bogin and Andrew Quintman (Boston: Wisdom, 2014), 205–50, 219. See Kerry Lucinda Brown, “Adorning the Buddhas: The Ceremonial Regalia of the Daśa Sthavira Ājus from Kwā Bahā, Nepal,” *Ars Orientalis* 47 (2017): 266–302, <https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0047.012>.

⁹ See for example the Vajravarahi mandala that was a personal meditation deity, or *yidam*, discussed in Steven M. Kossak and Jane Casey Singer, *Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet*, Exhibition catalog (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 96–99.

¹⁰ John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, Exhibition catalog (Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 260–63.

FURTHER READING

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