

# CULTURAL TRANSLATION OF A TANTRIC VISUALIZATION PRACTICE

ELENA PAKHOUTOVA AND KARL DEBRECZENY



Fig. 1 Visualization Practice (*Sadhana*), leaf 10 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; Wangzimiao, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia; ca. late 18th–19th century; pigments on paper; 10-3/8 × 10-5/8 in. (26.3 × 27 cm); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, Belgium; AE.1977.0026.13-54; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS

## THE ALL-KNOWING BUDDHA VAIROCHANA VISUALIZATION ALBUM

Wangzimiao Temple, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia  
ca. 18th–19th century

## SUMMARY

While using one's imagination to transform reality, a process known as visualization, is a central technique of Tibetan Buddhist practice, its process is rarely depicted in art. Art historians Elena Pakhoutova and Karl Debreczeny examine a unique depiction of step-by-step Tibetan Buddhist meditative visualization practice, painted in a Chinese court style for Mongol patrons. Possibly made as a luxury instructional guide for a Mongol prince, this album provides a rare glimpse into a meditative process that occurs only in the mind's eye.

Using one's imagination to transform reality, a process known as visualization, is central to Tibetan Buddhist practice. The instructions for this type of meditation are shared by a teacher with a qualified student, and the process is almost never depicted. Yet a set of fifty-four paintings from Inner Mongolia illustrates such a practice, step by step. The paintings constitute a detailed visual guide to an imaginative and secret practice centered on the All-Knowing Buddha (Sanskrit: Sarvavid, Tibetan: Kunrik) Vairochana. The cleverly composed illustrations provide a rare glimpse into a meditative process that occurs only in the mind's eye. The remarkable form of these works, driven by Mongolian patronage, displays layers of cultural conventions, in which the Tibetan Buddhist content is filtered through a Chinese visual translation.

## ORIGIN OF THE PAINTINGS

Aside from a few mantras, the paintings contain no other text, colophons, or identifying inscriptions. Who painted them, where, when, for whom, and even the order of the paintings are not known. In 1923 a Buddhist monk gave the paintings to the Belgian missionary Father Rafael Verbois (1885–1979) at what he referred to as Wangzimiao (“the Prince’s Temple”), in eastern Mongolia.<sup>1</sup> It seems the Prince’s Temple was a Mongolian monastery called Khoshuun Süme (known in Chinese as Hongcisi) located on Mount Gurban Tulguuri;<sup>2</sup> it was founded in Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia, in 1707 by the local Mongolian ruler Jamsu (d. 1708) as a family temple where Mongolian princes of Aokhan went to study Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the Manchus—a people from north of the Great Wall—conquered and ruled China. They established Tibetan Buddhism as one of the official religions of the empire, and production of Tibetan Buddhist art flourished at court. The Prince’s Temple, situated close to the major Qing art production centers of Beijing, Jehol, and Dolonnuur, was subsidized by the Qing court, and the Aokhan princes intermarried with the Manchu imperial family.

According to local gazetteers, one of the Manchu princesses who married the local prince’s son brought artisans from Beijing to Aokhan in 1729.<sup>4</sup> Later, the fifteenth prince, Gombojab (r. 1895–1924), himself a monk known as the lama prince, brought many artisans from Beijing and other areas to renovate the monastery.<sup>5</sup> While these accounts cannot be tied directly to the Album’s painting, they suggest possible scenarios for its creation. Given this aristocratic association with the temple and the high quality of the paintings, it is likely the album was made for a prince of Aokhan who studied at the Prince’s Temple, to aid his visualization practice.

## **A GUIDE TO VISUALIZATION**

Visualization is a process intended to create a different reality using one’s imagination. It is a fundamental element of tantra, a system of meditation and ritual meant to transform the mind and body. When focused on a specific deity, such as Vairochana, visualization and related ritual practices are called deity yoga. In deity yoga practitioners contemplate the nature of the mind. Then they gradually imagine themselves as a deity and recite prayers, perform gestures (mudras), and use ritual implements (fig. 2), all of which are depicted in detail in these paintings. Through repetition the practitioners strive to become the enlightened deity they imagine, taking on the qualities the deity represents.

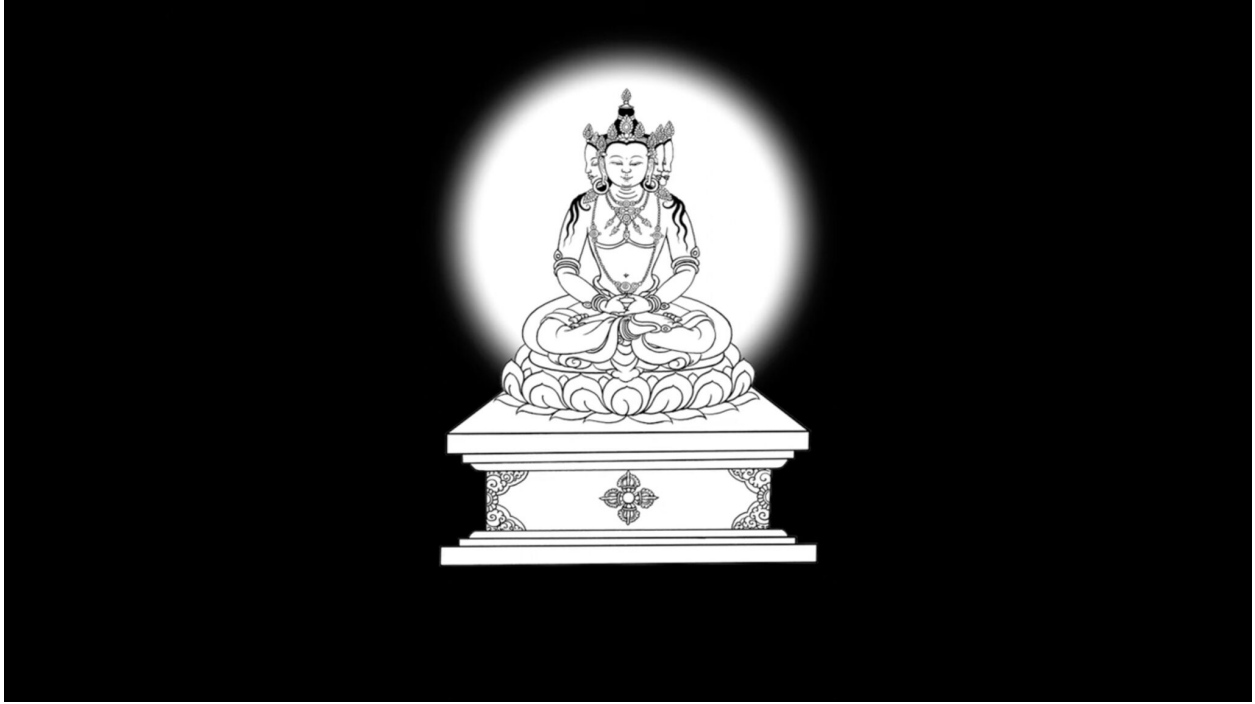


Fig. 2 The Rubin Museum of Art, "The All-Knowing Buddha: Visualizing Vairochana," *YouTube*, February 3, 2015, 2:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPKAJX-HnTo>

## **VAIROCHANA**

According to the tantric teachings that developed in India and spread through Asia around the eighth century, Buddha Vairochana signifies the fullest awakening of human potential. This tantric interpretation linked Vairochana to Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment, and Vairochana was considered the center of the Buddhist universe. Vairochana has several forms, all of which symbolize his enlightened nature. Embraced by rulers as the embodiment of divine kingship, he was fundamental to the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet. As Sarvavid, he is believed to remove all obstacles to a good rebirth, which is especially important in funerary contexts.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE ALBUM'S RITUAL NARRATIVE**

The paintings' original owner would have received an initiation and oral instructions from a qualified teacher before using these images for his visualization practice. The paintings illustrate a ritual from a system of teachings called *the Purification of All Bad Rebirths Tantra*

(*Sarvadurgatiparisodhana Tantra*).<sup>7</sup> Using the general outline, we distinguish six specific practices.

The practitioner begins with the preliminary practices, taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddhism—the Buddha, his teachings, and the religious community—generating the wish to become enlightened (*bodhicitta*), and takes vows. He practices visualization with ritual (fig. 3), using implements, reciting mantras, making symbolic offerings, and performing hand gestures. Then he gradually creates the palace, or mandala, of Sarvavid Vairochana (fig. 4), imagining himself as the central deity of this divine realm in the practice of deity yoga. He pictures the deity Trailokyavijaya, the Conqueror of the Three Realms, to remove obstacles to the accomplishment of this practice. He envisions a red lotus with Hum, the seed syllable of the deity, resting on it. He absorbs the syllable into his heart and then manifests himself as the blue wrathful deity Trailokyavijaya. The featured painting (fig. 1), leaf 10, depicts the deity in front of the meditator, in his mind's eye in a typical stance with multiple heads, arms, and legs. An extra, larger set of arrayed implements provides a clearer view of each object. Color-coded, undulating ribbons of light indicate the order of the visualization. This spelled-out rendering of the practice is not the norm in Tibetan painting and suggests the album was made for someone raised outside the Tibetan tradition.



Fig. 3 Preliminary Practices, leaf 5 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; Wangzimiao, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia; ca. late 18th–19th century; pigments on paper; 10-3/8 × 10-5/8 in. (26.3 × 27 cm); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, Belgium; AE.1977.0026.38-54; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS



Fig. 4 Mandala of Sarvavid Vairocana (Durgatiparisodhana from the Vajradhatu Mandala Series); Inner Mongolia or Beijing; ca. 18th century; colors on cloth with cloth mounting; 57 × 33½ in. (144.8 × 85.1 cm); Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gift of Natacha Rambova, 1960; 1960-131-1; photograph courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art  
 Then the practitioner imagines himself as Sarvavid Vairochana to cultivate the qualities of this buddha. The shift in leaf 17 from a three-quarter to a frontal view implies that the practitioner is assuming the qualities of the deity (fig. 5).<sup>8</sup> He sits on a blue lotus amid a limitless ocean suggestive of “the ocean of suffering,” a metaphor for the cyclical existence of death and rebirth known as samsara.



Fig. 5 Self-Generation (Imagining Oneself as the Deity), leaf 17 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; Wangzimiao, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia; ca. late 18th–19th century; pigments on paper; 10-3/8 × 10-5/8 in. (26.3 × 27 cm); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, Belgium; AE.1977.0026.35-54; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS

## CONTEMPLATING THE LIFE OF A BUDDHA

Having established himself as Sarvavid Vairochana, the practitioner contemplates the typical life of a buddha, exemplified by the story of Buddha Shakyamuni, the buddha of our time. In this album the unusual depictions of the legendary deeds of the Buddha illustrate two types of enlightenment (figs. 6, 7, and 8). Following the non-tantric enlightenment shown in leaf 34, leaf 36 presents the full and complete awakening (fig. 7), according to the texts of the Yogatantras, and visually states the superiority of the tantric enlightenment. A moon disk symbolizing the nature of ultimate reality surmounts an enthroned blue lotus, representative of Vairochana, with rainbow-colored light emanating from it.



Fig. 6 Nontantric Enlightenment (bottom left), Contemplating the Life of a Buddha, leaf 34 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; Wangzimiao, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia; ca. late 18th–19th century; pigments on paper; 10-3/8 × 10-5/8 in. (26.3 × 27 cm); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, Belgium; AE.1977.0026.05-54; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS



Fig. 7 Complete Tantric Enlightenment, Contemplating the Life of a Buddha, leaf 36 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; Wangzimiao, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia; ca. late 18th–19th century; pigments on paper; 10-3/8 × 10-5/8 in. (26.3 × 27 cm); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, Belgium; AE.1977.0026.52-54; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS



Fig. 8 Fully Awakened Buddha, Contemplating the Life of a Buddha, leaf 37 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; Wangzimiao, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia; ca. late 18th–19th century; pigments on paper; 10-3/8 × 10-5/8 in. (26.3 × 27 cm); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, Belgium; E.1977.0026.07-54; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS



Fig. 9 Ritual for Deceased and Concluding Rites, Contemplating the Life of a Buddha, leaf 53 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; Wangzimiao, Aokhan Banner, Inner Mongolia; ca. late 18th–19th century; pigments on paper; 10-3/8 × 10-5/8 in. (26.3 × 27 cm); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, Belgium; AE.1977.0026.41-54; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS

The practitioners can also practice Visualizing the Deity in Front of Oneself, imagining Sarvavid's blessings as rays of light liberating all beings from unfortunate rebirths.

The last group of paintings illustrates the Ritual for Deceased and Concluding Rites to purify all negativities of the deceased and ensure a better rebirth. In leaf 53 (fig. 9), one visualizes that with this ritual, not only the deceased but all beings are freed from the hell realm and unfortunate rebirths. The light emanating from the Buddha Vairochana's hand bathes the hell realms, releasing the beings who burst out of the gates of hell. A thanksgiving feast concludes the celebrations.

## CULTURAL TRANSLATION

The visual language of the album is an interesting blend of Tibetan Buddhist content expressed in a markedly Chinese aesthetic with imagery quite outside the Tibetan tradition. For instance,



the square format of the paper is a typical Chinese album form not used by Tibetans. The leaves illustrating the section on Contemplating the Life of the Buddha reimagine him as a Chinese prince, and buildings throughout are modeled on Chinese palace architecture. The stylized green and blue landscape, as well as the distinctive imagery of visionary experience in the form of radiating rainbow light, with pale pink and yellow multicolored clouds, can both be traced to fifteenth-century Chinese models.

Stylistic variations suggest the hands of different artists and indicate production in an atelier. Fundamental mistakes due to unfamiliarity with Tibetan Buddhist content preclude Tibetan artists.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the seemingly ancillary embellishments that indicate multiple cultural references hint at a Chinese identity for the artists. For instance, Daoist-inspired content, including the pairing of tigers and dragons (fig. 5), dragon kings, sages, and heavenly officials, foreign to Tibetan cultural or ritual context, is an indication of Chinese artists falling back on familiar forms.<sup>10</sup> The content of these paintings, however, is clearly Tibetan Buddhist; Daoist-inspired imagery appears as supplemental, a result of an artistic process of convergence, and is not a reflection of religious syncretism often found in Chinese art.<sup>11</sup>

In leaf 17 (fig. 5 above) the artists reveal their cultural and geographic origins in the depiction of aquatic creatures, the crab and clam in particular, not mentioned in the ritual texts. The gray crab with black claws complete with tiny hairs (fig. 10) appears to be a detailed image of a hairy crab (fig. 11), and the clam with red flesh (fig. 12) is a blood clam (fig. 13), both freshwater delicacies of the Jiangsu area of Zhejiang on the southeast coast of China. Such specific cultural references, so outside Tibetan and Mongolian cultural experiences (neither traditionally includes seafood), are extremely telling, and suggest the artists who created these paintings probably came from this region of China.<sup>12</sup> Painters from Zhejiang were quite famous, often recruited from the north to serve the imperial court.

The album's many visual idiosyncrasies, such as the awkward rendering of the Tibetan Buddhist content, would be hard to imagine in the Qianlong period (1736–1795), when such imagery was strictly regulated. It is likely a product of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, when

many of the patterns related to Tibetan Buddhism established by the Qianlong emperor were still followed, with relaxed imperial scrutiny.



Fig. 10 Detail of hairy crab from leaf 17 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS



Fig. 12 Detail of blood clam from leaf 17 from the Sarvavid Vairochana Visualization Album; photograph by Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, courtesy Collection City of Antwerp – MAS



Fig. 11 The Chinese mitten or Shanghai hairy crab (*Eriocheir sinensis*); photography by BobYue



Fig. 13 Blood clam or cockle (*Tegillarca granosa*); photography by Chettaprin Pimontaranukool

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jan Van Alphen, ed., *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide. With Essays by Christian Luczanits, Elena Pakhoutova, and Karl Debreczeny*, Exhibition Catalog, Exhibition catalog (Antwerp: BAI, 2013), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online), 7–10.

<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Charleux, *Temples et monastères de Mongolie-Intérieur* (Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques and Institut national d'histoire de l'art (with CD-ROM, 2006), monastery no. 123; Karl Debreczeny, “The Art Historical Context of Antwerp’s Vairocana Album,” in *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide*, ed. Jan Van Alphen, Exhibition catalog (Antwerp: BAI, 2013), 166n4.

[https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online).

<sup>3</sup> *Aohan Wenshi Ziliao 敖汉文史资料* [Veritable Records of the Aohan], vol. 4 (Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia: Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Aohanqi weiyuanhui 中国人民政治协商会议敖汉旗委员会 (neibu 内部 internal publication), 1984-86), 3:85; 1:50–58; 4:29; 4:101–16.

<sup>4</sup> *Aohan Wenshi Ziliao 敖汉文史资料* [Veritable Records of the Aohan], vol. 4 (Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia: Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Aohanqi weiyuanhui 中国人民政治协商会议敖汉旗委员会 (neibu 内部 internal publication), 1984-64), 4:36–37.

<sup>5</sup> *Aohan Wenshi Ziliao 敖汉文史资料* [Veritable Records of the Aohan], vol. 4 (Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia: Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Aohanqi weiyuanhui 中国人民政治协商会议敖汉旗委员会 (neibu 内部 internal publication), 1984), 4:32–33.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Vairocana practices, see Elena Pakhoutova, “Buddhist Practices and Rituals Centered on Buddha Vairocana in Tibet,” in *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide*, ed. Elena

Pakhoutova and Jan Van Alphen, Exhibition Catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2013), 39–45, [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online).

<sup>7</sup> Commonly referred to as Yogatantra, but given a lack of identifying captions, the exact text is unknown.

<sup>8</sup> Elena Pakhoutova, “Buddhist Practices and Rituals Centered on Buddha Vairocana in Tibet,” in *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide*, ed. Elena Pakhoutova and Jan Van Alphen, Exhibition Catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2013), 39–45, [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online), 45; depicted in Jan Van Alphen, ed., *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide. With Essays by Christian Luczanits, Elena Pakhoutova, and Karl Debreczeny*, Exhibition catalog, Exhibition catalog (Antwerp: BAI, 2013), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online), 80–105.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jan Van Alphen, ed., *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide. With Essays by Christian Luczanits, Elena Pakhoutova, and Karl Debreczeny*. Exhibition Catalog, Exhibition catalog (Antwerp: BAI, 2013), 121, [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online),

<sup>10</sup> Karl Debreczeny, “The Art Historical Context of Antwerp’s Vairocana Album,” in *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide.. Van Alphen*, ed. Jan Van Alphen, Exhibition catalog (Antwerp: BAI, 2013), 27, [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Debreczeny, “The Art Historical Context of Antwerp’s Vairocana Album,” in *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide.. Van Alphen*, ed. Jan Van Alphen, Exhibition catalog (Antwerp: BAI, 2013), 30, [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online).

<sup>12</sup> Karl Debreczeny, “The Art Historical Context of Antwerp’s Vairocana Album,” in *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide.. Van Alphen*, ed. Jan Van Alphen, Exhibition catalog (Antwerp: BAI, 2013), 27, [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online).

## FURTHER READING

Van Alphen, Jan, ed. 2013. *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide. With essays by Christian Luczanits, Elena Pakhoutova, and Karl Debreczeny*. Exhibition catalog. Antwerp: BAI; New York: Rubin Museum of Art. [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all\\_knowing\\_buddha\\_online](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/all_knowing_buddha_online).

Wayman, Alex, and Ryujun Tajima. 1998. *The Enlightenment of Vairocana*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

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