



# The Art Of Compassion

Buddhist Art From  
The Todd Barlin Collection







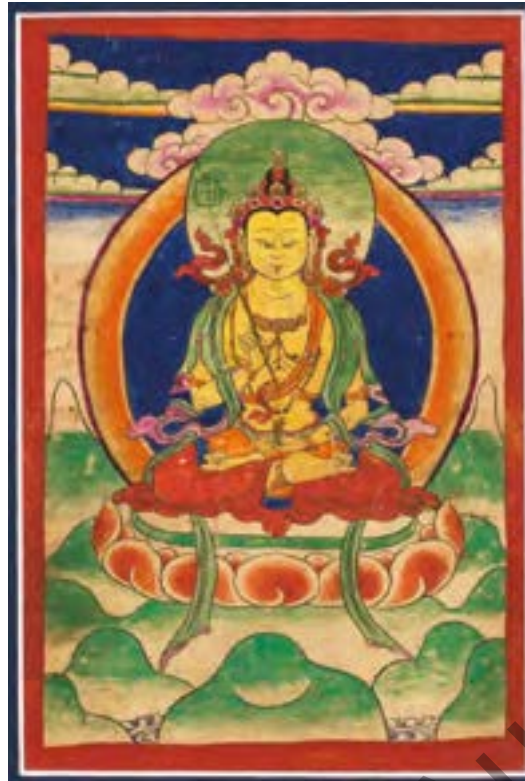
# **The Art Of Compassion**

**Tibetan, Mongolian, and Burmese Buddhist Art  
from the Todd Barlin Collection**

David Templeman

Monash Asia Institute  
Monash University

With Forward by Todd Barlin



*Tsakli* painting, Tibet, 19th century  
paper with pigments, 17.5 x 11.5 cm

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Front cover: Detail of bronze Avalokitesvara; see also pp. 13–14.

Inside front cover: Photo of collection display in Todd Barlin's home.

Back cover: Detail of travelling shrine of the Field of Refuge, Mongolia, 18th century, clay.



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Set of *tsakli* paintings, Tibet, 19th century  
paper with pigments, 17.5 x 11.5 cm each



Buddha, Shan,  
Burma, 18th  
century, lacquer  
on wood, 88cm

# Introduction

Every collection starts with a single object, an object that captures a person's attention. My first Buddhist art object was a small clay votive from Tibet. I was completely enamoured with this small clay object; in my mind, I could see the monasteries and hear the monks chanting and playing ritual instruments, as I had seen in documentaries.

I had been visiting museums and art galleries regularly and seeing the beauty and variety of Buddhist art for many years. Buddhist art began to hold my attention more and more, as art but more importantly as a seed of inspiration and living. I started to read about Buddhist ideas and I attended talks and empowerments by Buddhists. The more I understood the principles of Buddhist teachings, the more I could feel the strength of these ideas gently opening my heart.

Now I see the artworks both in terms of visual beauty and as a reminder of my commitment to being a kind and compassionate person each day. The large Avalokitesvara in this book is in the spot where I pray and meditate daily. I feel comforted and inspired by his image.

I have worn one of the small Mongolian votives (*gau*) in the exhibition on and off for many years. Sometimes I wear it when I have to deal with a difficult situation, so it will remind me to keep calm and put my spiritual goal first, which is to treat others with kindness and respect. I was told by an old friend that the knot at the end of the string that holds the votive should be rough and

slightly irritate your neck, as a constant reminder of how to behave.

In 2011 I fell sick, which was diagnosed as a rare blood cancer. During that time and throughout the treatment, my whole life changed dramatically. I was forced to face my own mortality and also look more deeply for the meaning for my life.

Being ill had a positive outcome: in contemplating the meaning of my life, I could see that the most meaningful part of being a human was the kindness and love shared and demonstrated with others. I found that collecting art was not that important, unless it, too, could be used as an act of love and kindness toward others.

Kindness for me is a daily plan of action; I am challenged to try my best to treat other human beings with unconditional kindness and respect. I often fall way short of this, but the seed of the Buddhist teachings has opened my heart to the possibility of kindness as a way of life.

We live in a time of many divisive ideas, but Buddhist ideals of compassion and kindness toward all beings can bring people closer together in mutual respect. I hope that people will enjoy this exhibition and also feel the underlying message of hope: Kindness and compassion for others is the greatest achievement of both art and life.

**Todd Barlin**

Director, Oceanic Arts Australia





# The Heart of Buddhist Art

At the heart of all Buddhist art lies a sense of compassion. Compassion informs images of Buddha as much as it does images of wrath, which are merely another aspect of the more usually conceived, gentle type of compassion. As any parent knows, true compassionate love for a child is not always a soft or nurturing thing; to be effective, compassion needs to be tempered with its opposite. So, the apparent contrast between the peaceful Buddhas and their wrathful forms – what we might regard as a separate ‘species’ of Buddhist art, that of wrath and violence – is, in fact, simply the same theme being looked at from a different side. The ‘art of compassion’ reflects who we really are.

Buddhism recognises that we are complex beings who are primarily united by a sense of love and compassion for our fellows, despite any other differences which may exist to separate us. Buddhism teaches us that although there may appear to be many complex deities, at heart it is an atheistic system of practice in which the main goal is to regard the world and its inhabitants (including ourselves) with compassionate concern. This is, in fact, a sense of active stewardship in which we are all responsible for each other and live our lives with this as the main goal. Active compassion may adopt many forms, and some of them may not be immediately recognisable as such. The above example of parental love is a case in point. The highest ideal of the Mahayana system of Buddhism found in China, Japan, Tibet and Mongolia is that of the bodhisattva. This idealised person embodies compassion through their actions in the world. They possess no sense of self, no sense of separateness from others, and no sense of exclusivity, and their modes of action serve to inspire others to the same sense of compassion that is deeply involved in the world as it is experienced. It is not a compassion ‘out there’, existing as a concept, but rather it is something to be at the forefront of one’s mind at all times. It constantly asks one difficult questions, such as ‘What can I do to help?’; ‘What is the most skilful way to assist?’; ‘Is this the most appropriate time to offer compassion?’; ‘Am I exercising compassion for some selfish motive?’

As viewers of Buddhist art for the first time, we may be struck from the start by the lack of light and shade on the painted surfaces, noting that the subject is apparently uniformly lit with no attempt

at chiaroscuro. This is because the Buddhist tradition of painting, even in ancient India, required no external light sources; as Erberto LoBue notes, ‘... divine bodies do not receive light, they emanate it’.<sup>1</sup> I would take LoBue’s observation a step further and suggest that, rather than the deity radiating light exclusively, it can also be claimed that the illumination of the focal deity is in fact as much due to the viewer bringing to the surface of the piece the illuminating light of their own insights, experiences and compassion. This gives the viewer an active role and a measure of involvement in viewing Buddhist art, rather than relying on the image to ‘give’ something to them.

## Karma and its fruit

This idea of the viewer bringing their own light to the image makes complete sense in light of one of the three core beliefs in Buddhism: *vipaka*, the law of Karma and its fruit. Karma is simply the sum of the actions one performs in life, and its fruit is the sum total of one’s good and bad deeds, as well as one’s selfish and unselfish deeds. This ‘bank balance’ clearly shows the level of advancement or otherwise on the Buddhist path.

## Impermanence and unsatisfactoriness

At its most basic level, Buddhist art is intended to bring about some personal reflection. It can be said to inspire faith in the sense of reminding the viewer that what is seen and experienced in life is only one dimension of what exists. Buddhism is said to be based upon a premise of the omnipresence of suffering; however, this is a poor translation of the word *dukha*. A far better and more helpful interpretation is its more exact meaning, ‘things as unsatisfactory’. This translation reaches to the heart of Buddhist doctrine; that is, all things (including life, relationships, feelings) are unsatisfactory because they are not permanent, yet they bring with them a false sense of existing forever.

Buddhism says that accepting anything as if it were permanent is futile. So, the question might be asked, ‘Are these Buddha forms also impermanent?’ The response has to be a certain

<sup>1</sup> Lo Bue, E., 2008, ‘Tibetan Aesthetics versus Western Aesthetics in the Appreciation of Religious Art’, in Esposito, M. (ed.), *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th centuries*, vol. 2, École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Paris, France.



'Yes.' This becomes clear when we look at the numerous images of Maitreya Buddha in the exhibition. He is the Buddha of the next world age and his name means 'loving-kindness'. To further reinforce the core idea of the impermanence of all things, there is no guarantee that even his teachings will be the same as those of the Buddha of our age, Shakyamuni Buddha.

### Reconciling opposites

In looking at the objects in *The Art of Compassion*, the viewer will be struck by the sheer simplicity of some pieces, as well as the almost bewildering complexity of many others. Essentially, the collection may be seen as reflecting two halves of the enlightened human mind. The tranquil deities are as much a part of us as the wrathful ones; these complex figures have emerged from

a Buddhist culture that has recognised quite readily that human beings are composed of competing urges – it is only in recognising them in all their bewildering variety and working with them that any progress on the path of becoming free from negativities and other hindrances may be achieved. The story of the poet and saint Milarepa (11th–12th century), who murdered in his youth, reflects this overcoming of one's past wicked deeds; there are several images of Milarepa in this exhibition.

David Templeman  
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**Three Tibetan taskli depicting the Buddha's wise words, 19th century paper with polychrome pigments, 9 x 7.5 cm each**

In a Buddhist sutra, the Buddha was asked a series of questions by a certain minor celestial deity who had adopted the form of a Brahmin in the famous grove of Jetavana in which the Buddha gave many of his teachings. In this brief discourse, the Brahmin asked the Buddha what the most excellent items were (they included swords, poisons and armours), as well as what the most attractive, disgusting and evil items were. The discourse is exemplified in these cards, which make the sutra teaching graphic for the student who learns it by heart. They form part of a complete set.

**Top left:** The Brahmin asked the Buddha, 'What is the most precious treasure and what is the most secure treasure trove?' The Buddha replied, 'Virtue is the most precious treasure and immortality is the most secure treasure trove.' Here, the Buddha is depicted holding a zamatok (bowl of blessed precious substances), referring to the receptacle for these things.

**Top middle:** The Brahmin asked the Buddha, 'What is the sharpest sword and which armour is invulnerable?' The Buddha replied, 'A single word spoken in wrath is the sharpest sword and the most invulnerable armour is patience.'

**Top right:** The Brahmin asked the Buddha, 'What is the very best weapon of all?' The Buddha replied, 'Wisdom is the best weapon of all.' Here, the Buddha is holding a Tibetan book, most probably representing the 'Perfection of Wisdom' literature.

## Buddhas



**Buddha, Tibet, 15th–16th century  
clay with gold and polychrome pigments, 14.5 cm (H)**

This elegantly restrained Buddha figure is typical of the style found in southern and central Tibet. Its focus is on the harmony and simplicity of the Buddha himself. His right hand is in the earth-touching position of calling it to witness his Enlightenment, and his left hand remains in the meditation position. In these two gestures, the Buddha figure represents two of the major points in his life.

**Buddha, Burma, 18th century (facing)  
stone with traces of pigment, 84 cm (H)**

The image focuses on the harmony and simplicity of the Buddha himself. His right hand is in the earth-touching position of calling it to witness his Enlightenment, and his left hand remains in the meditation position.





# Bodhisattvas

## **Avalokitesvara, Tibet, 18th century (below & facing) gilt bronze with polychrome pigments, 110 cm (H)**

This most impressive and extremely beautiful form of the deity of compassion, Avalokitesvara, is also known as Ekadasamukha or 'Eleven-Faced'. He shows himself as beneficent and concerned for the viewer. Due to his insights into the suffering of humanity, his head exploded into the eleven separate heads, seen here.

Tibetans and Mongolians believe that the compassion shown by this deity is reborn in the form of each of the fourteen incarnations of the Dalai Lama. Avalokitesvara is the most revered of all deities in the Tibeto-Mongol world.

As is usual with bronze images of such complexity, many of the attributes in Avalokitesvara's hands are missing. Each attribute represents an aspect of his nature. In his top-left hand, he should hold the lotus of purity; in the middle-left hand, the bow and arrow of direct action (here replaced by a Dharma wheel); and, in the lower one, a vase of pure water. In his top-right hand, he should hold a crystal rosary; in the middle-right hand a Dharma wheel (duplicated on the left side); and his lower hand, with an eye in its palm representing his seeing of suffering, is held in the gesture of giving the Buddha's teachings to humanity.

The wrathful head, second from the top, is that of Bhairava, the great wrathful deity. Its presence is a symbolic representation that even tranquil and peaceful deities such as Avalokitesvara have a reflex aspect which serves to protect the Buddhist doctrine.







## Tantric Deities

Particularly noticeable in *The Art of Compassion* are the many pieces that represent what are known as 'oath-bound' deities. These deities were local to both Tibet and Mongolia, and said to have been hostile to the introduction of Buddhism; their power was sufficient to cause problems for the newly introduced religion. They were said to have been skilfully converted from their opposition into deities, who actively protected Buddhism, thereby avoiding the need for ongoing hostilities. This process of binding them to their oaths was accomplished most notably by Padmasambhava, represented in a number of images here, in the 8th century.

This leads necessarily to a brief discussion on the role of deities in Buddhism, a supposedly

atheistic belief system. The Buddha grew up in a world peopled by deities, ranging from the great Vedic gods of India to myriad local deities – one might even refer to them as 'local god-lets'. He was asked about their existence and responded by saying that, while they certainly existed and could bring about inconveniences, they had no role whatsoever in one's own passage through the world and onwards to Enlightenment. In other words, they were there but were nothing to do with what he had taught about the mind and how to bring it under control. So, in the Tibeto-Mongol tradition of Buddhist art, we see a great number of either 'oath-bound' deities or even some who have been directly drawn into Buddhism for the direct benefit they bring.



Thangka depicting three Mahakala deities, Mongolia, 19th century  
pigments on silk, 78 x 25 cm



**Begtse, Mongolia, mid 18th–early 19th century**  
**clay in a metal gau, 12.5 x 15 cm**



Begtse is a Tibetan name for what the Mongolians refer to as Jamsaran. Begtse is the most important and frequently found protector deity in Mongolia and serves as protector of that land and of its most important lamas, the Bogd Gegen lineage. In Tibet he is one of the protectors of the lineage of Dalai Lamas and also of the temple of the Panchen Lama. His origins are the subject of many myths, but one persistent story known to all Tibetans and Mongolians concerns his appearance before the 3rd Dalai Lama, who was travelling to Mongolia in 1577. The Dalai Lama subjugated Begtse and 'oath-bound' him to be a protector of Buddhism, which has been his role since. He is depicted crushing his enemies underfoot and wearing typical Mongolian armour draped with the heads of his slain enemies.

He holds aloft a sword with a *vajra* hilt and threatens with his left hand. In the crook of his arm, he holds a halberd, another warlike implement. He is surrounded by his retinue of red-coloured demons, who were part of his army that appeared before the 3rd Dalai Lama. Although the clay pressing is quite old, it has been repainted several times by its numerous owners.

**Begtse Tsam mask, Mongolia, early 20th century (facing)**  
**papier-mâché and metal with coral and beads, 70 x 47 cm**

This outstanding and powerful mask is of the greatest importance in Mongolian culture as it represents Begtse, the mighty protector deity of Mongolia itself. It is said that Begtse, along with his army of red demons, meets enemy forces on Mongolia's borders and prevents their entry into the sacred land. In Ulanbataar, Mongolia's capital city, there is found in the Lama Chojin temple a huge image of Begtse, which, like this one, is composed of papier-mâché and coral. In the Lama Chojin example, the face alone has over 6000 coral pieces, a not dissimilar number to the corals in this piece. This mask probably dates from early 20th century (or even a little earlier) and shows something of both the ability and artistic sensitivity of Mongolian artists.

Begtse has the third eye to denote his inner nature as an Enlightened being, and his crown of five skulls symbolises his mastery over the five forms of hindrances, which make the mind unclear and uncertain. The five hindrances are commonly translated as: mental afflictions; defiling thoughts; destructive emotions; negative emotions; and mentally disturbing fixations.

At the top of his crown, a *vajra* is seen protruding, symbolising that despite his apparent wrathful and energetic exterior (as seen by those without insight) his nature is one of unshakeability and tranquillity on the inside. It is important to understand that in these religious dances ('Cham' in Tibetan and 'Tsam' in Mongolian), the masks are not simply disguises or part of stagecraft. For the duration of the dance ritual, sometimes lasting several days, the masks become the deity itself and are treated with the same respect and receive the same offerings as a sacred image would.

## Saints and lamas



**Figure of the Lama Tai Situ Jangchup Gyaltsen, 1302–64, Tibet, 16th century  
gilt bronze, 11.5 cm (H)**

Tai Situ Jangchub Gyaltsen is one of Tibet's most important historical figures. The dynasty he founded (the Phagmodru) replaced the Sakya rulers of Tibet, whose power derived from the Mongols. Many such images of him were created even after the Phagmodru family ceased to rule, because Tibetans still held him in extremely high regard due to his sense of mission in wresting power from the Sakya and his administrative ability after that victory. To a great extent, the governmental structure he set up remained until the 18th–19th century. A popular saying in Tibet was that, under his rule, an old woman with a bag filled with gold was able to travel safely throughout Tibet. He was not a religious prelate, having adopted a role of a patron of Buddhism instead, and spent a great deal of energy on printing holy texts and building new monasteries.



**Figure of the lama, Tibet, 18th century  
gilt bronze, 34.5 cm (H)**

This image represents an unknown lama, possibly of the Gelug tradition of Buddhism, predominant in Mongolia. His eyes suggest that he has only recently come out of a deep meditative state, but his raised hand is in the active preaching gesture. It is probable that a book was at rest in the hand in his lap, most likely a volume of the 'Perfection of Wisdom' texts. Part of the beauty of this figure is the unchased and beautiful repoussé work, especially the crisp folds of his robes which, with their gilding, suggest that he was of the Gelug tradition, whose monks wear robes of yellow.





## Travelling shrines (*gau*) and clay votives (*tsa tsa*)

Mongolians and Tibetans were great travellers, either as pilgrims or as nomads. Even farmers travelled great distances with their livestock. Never wishing to be far away from their personal deities, they created travelling shrines to hold images of them so that they could maintain their religious practices wherever they were. The shrines were usually attached to the body by a length of flat woven material and located on the chest, or, if physical labour was required, on the back. They were usually quite small, but examples are known that are 30 centimetres or more in height. Aside from the image of the personal practice deity, the travelling shrine (*gau*) would be filled with printed prayers, blessed threads and seeds, small clay images, and small fragments from a lama's robes, among other objects. When at home, the shrine was usually removed from the body and placed on the family shrine in the tent or house, the most honoured place.



**Vajrabhairava, Mongolia, 19th century**  
**clay with polychrome pigments in a metal *gau*, 11 x 8 cm**

The charm box or travelling shrine (*gau*), which was part of every Tibetan and Mongolian's possessions, may be seen here without its usually decorative front panel through which a part of the deity could be viewed through a small window. A *gau* was usually filled with blessed materials, prayers and charms, and occasionally pieces of a lama's robes for extra holiness. Here, the front of the *gau* has a design of the Namchu Wangden. This design combines the ten syllables of the Kalacakra Mantra and is considered to be highly auspicious.



**Mould for making clay tsa tsa (top left)  
Mongolia, 18th century, bronze, 16 cm (H)**

**Atiguhya Hayagriva (top right), Mongolia, 18th century  
clay with polychrome pigments in a wood gau, 13 x 7.5 cm**

Bronze moulds like this were used to make clay votives in vast numbers. The votives were stamped out and then sun-dried and hand-painted; small ones were sometimes placed inside a reliquary known as a *stupa* in vast numbers and larger ones were put into a small travelling shrine made from wood or metal. These portable shrines were called *gau* in Tibetan. Larger shrines intended to hold clay plaques were known as *gungervaa* in Mongolian. There are several examples of large clay pressings in *gungervaa* in this exhibition.

When the reverse image of the deity is made into a bronze mould by being cast, it is capable of pressing the deity image in great numbers. Hence, such clay forms, known as *tsa tsa* in Tibetan, are frequently found on household altars or in small travelling shrines, and are sometimes stuffed into large *stupa* shrines in their thousands. The earliest of these clay pressings found in Tibet and, more rarely, in Mongolia are those made in India around the 10th century and brought back by pilgrims. The process of making clay pressings can also be part of a larger practice of 'pressing the deity onto the environment'. The Austrian-American explorer Joseph Rock, who spent several years in eastern Tibet in the 1920s, photographed a monk sitting by a river pressing a mould into the water repeatedly. The monk claimed that, as the water was blessed by being 'imprinted' with a deity, all sentient creatures who drank or were touched by its water would be thus blessed. It is said that even pressing the air with a mould has such an effect.



## Miniature Thangka paintings in a Gau

### 23. Vajrapani, Mongolia, 19th century, 8 x 6.5 cm

Vajrapani, with his raised *vajra* and threatening gesture. The attempt at expressing musculature is reminiscent of certain early European painting and this attempt at realistic effect is relatively rare in Tibeto-Mongol art.

### 24. Yama and Yami, Mongolia, 19th century, 7.5 x 7 cm

The pair, brother and sister, are standing atop a bull. The pair are originally found in the ancient Indian stories in the Rig Veda (approximately 1500 BC). In Buddhism, this relationship was regarded as being one which focused on transcending worldly desires (here, represented by the bull) and being constantly aware of the omnipresence of death, over which they rule.

### 25. Begtse, Mongolia, 19th century, 8 x 6.5 cm

Begtse, meaning 'Secret Armour', is called Jamsaran in Mongolian. Another name he goes by in Mongolia is Ulaan Sakhius or 'Red-coloured Protector'. He is the most important of all Mongolian dharma protectors and stands on top of a human and a green-coloured horse, holding a sword and a freshly taken human heart in his left hand.

### 26. Guhyasadhana Hayagriva, Mongolia, 19th century, 9 x 7.5 cm

Translated as 'Secret Vision of the Horse-necked One', he is readily identified by the three horse heads emerging from his own. His elephant-skin cloak emerges on his right side. He holds a variety of protective weapons, including a *vajra* and sword on his right side, and makes a threatening gesture and holds a triangular banner on his left.

### 27. Simhamukha Dakini, Mongolia, 19th century, 8.5 x 7 cm

Translated as 'Wisdom-holding Woman with the Lion's Head', she assists meditators in their practice and, in her ultimate form as Samantabhadri, she embodies primordial wisdom. She is not a protector deity, but rather a pure-wisdom holder.

### 28. Vajrasadhu, Mongolia, 19th century, 8 x 7 cm

One of the forms of Vajrasadhu ('Beneficent Vajra'). Most forms carry an attribute associated with the blacksmith caste from which he emanated, but they are not evident in this miniature. He was one of the local deities of Tibet converted by Padmasambhava in the 7th–8th century and adopted by the Mongolians.

### 29. Vajrasadhu, Mongolia, 19th century, 10.5 x 8.5 cm

One of the forms of Vajrasadhu ('Beneficent Vajra'). Most forms carry an attribute associated with the blacksmith caste from which he emanated, but they are not evident in this miniature. He was one of the local deities of Tibet converted by Padmasambhava in the 7th–8th century and adopted by the Mongolians.

### 30. Padmasambhava, Mongolia, 19th century, 9 x 7.5 cm

The yogic tantrika from north-western India is shown here in magnificent robes and with a look of amazement. He holds power *vajra* and a skull cup of wisdom and has a staff in the crook of his arm with five heads in various stages of decay, as a reminder of life's impermanence.

### 31. Vajravega, Mongolia, 19th century, 10 x 8 cm

A wrathful form of Kalacakra ('The Wheel of Time'), who is perhaps the most important cosmic deity in Tibeto-Mongol Buddhism, Vajravega's function is to protect meditators embarking on the arduous Kalacakra practices and then to attract those not yet fully committed into that field. Thereafter, he establishes a protection zone for the meditator and for the mentally created Kalacakra mandala itself.



23



24



25



26



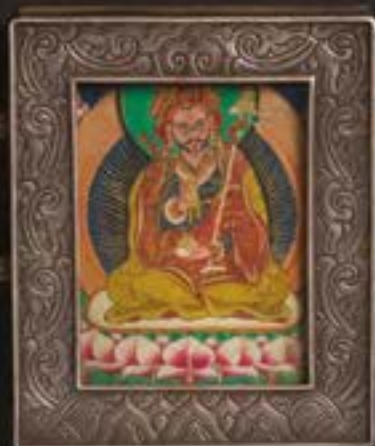
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## **Tsa tsa (clay votives)**

### **41. Maitreya Buddha, Tibet, 14th–15th century, 11 x 7.5 cm**

The Buddha of the future, awaiting his call to the next world age.

### **42. Green Tara with her attendants, Tibet, 17th–18th century, 8.5 x 6 cm**

To Tara's left is the wrathful Ekajata ('She with a Single Plait'); to her right is an unknown deity. Tara sits on a lion throne with beautiful ornamentation scroll work between the lions and a trace of Tibetan inscription at the very bottom.

### **43. Maitreya Buddha, Tibet, 17th–18th century, 7.5 x 6 cm**

Buddha of the future, Maitreya ('Compassionate Love'), awaiting his call to the next world age. He is seen with his hands held in a preaching gesture as he instructs the beings in his heavenly realm before his descent to earth in the next world age.

### **44. Buddha, Tibet, 17th–18th century, 5.5 x 5 cm**

### **45. Buddha, Tibet, 17th–18th century, 5.5 x 5.5 cm**

The Buddha is seated in earth-touching pose and is surrounded by a prayer written in Ranjana script, a decorative Indian style now rarely used except in Tibetan monasteries in decorative book titles and similar places where elegance is essential. At the four corners are found the seed (*bija*) syllables of the Buddha's mantra.

### **46. Manjusri, Tibet, 19th century, 5 x 5 cm**

This form of Manjusri shows him with his hands in a teaching gesture and with his emblems (the sword of wisdom and the book of 'Perfection of Wisdom') sitting atop lotuses at his shoulders.

### **47. Manjusri, Tibet, 17th–18th century, 7.5 x 5.5 cm**

### **48. Vajrasattvra, Tibet, 17th–18th century, 7 x 6 cm**

### **49. Three long-life deities, Mongolia, 18th–19th century, 7 x 6 cm**

At top is Amitayus holding his long-life nectar in a vase. Below to his left is Ushnishavijaya, who may be seen above, and to his bottom right is the White Tara. Between the lower figures is a *stupa*. In ceremonies to bring about healing and life strengthening, these are the most usual deities employed.

### **50. Votive in the form of an ancient *stupa*, Mongolia, 18th century, 9 x 6 cm**







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## Thangka and tsakli teaching cards

Buddhist teaching is not something learned from books, although they certainly play a part in reinforcing what one has already learned. The prime way of learning in Tibeto-Mongol Buddhism is through one's master's words. A common sentiment in those lands is that, without a fully qualified master to transmit them, the Buddha's teachings may well never have existed.

In learning the many complex rituals involving sometimes hundreds of deity forms, their names, iconography, secret syllables and so on, a student must have a teacher who almost always transmits this information orally. As an aid to memory, especially where complex deities are to be learned, small cards representing these myriad forms are shown by the master to the teacher, and the details, often found on the back of each card, are read aloud by the teacher with the intention that the student retain the details in their memory. These small cards are called *tsakli* or *tsakali*. Due to their constant use, it is extremely rare to find any that pre-date the 17th century, although there do exist *tsakli* dating to the 13th century.

When a deity form has been fixed in the mind and one has embarked on the path of Buddhist tantra, at a certain stage one is expected to select a tutelary deity; that is, a deity that is core to one's heart-practice. This deity then becomes the focus of one being, and it is not unusual for both monks and laypeople to spend a great deal of money commissioning a large painting of such deities. These scroll paintings are known as *thangkas*. For the most part, the painted image, surrounded by costly silks and often covered with a gauzy silk protective cover, are kept unrolled and often show minimal wear after several centuries. In the case of *thangkas* that form part of regular rituals, such as those for the after-death period where they are rolled and unrolled frequently, wear can be considerable.



Three miniature *thangka* paintings, Mongolia, 19th century  
paper with pigments, 7.5 x 6.5 cm

Vajrapani, Mongolia, 18th century (facing)  
paper with pigments, 17.5 x 12 cm

Vajrapani can appear either as a black or dark-coloured figure or, as seen here, as a yellow golden deity. Both forms have the same function. The legend believed by many Tibetans and Mongolians is that in his earliest form, Vajrapani was a yellow-hued deity. However, being forced by the Buddhas to drink the tainted urine of the Hindu cosmological deity Rahu, the god of the moon, rather than let it pollute the earth, Vajrapani's colour turned to black-blue; it is in this form that he is most commonly seen. This then represents the earliest form of Vajrapani, whose worship and rituals are basically the same as his more common form. He holds the trident (a symbol of the Hindu great deity Shiva) in his right hand and makes a threatening gesture with his left. The painting is both simple and understated, yet at the same time quite powerful. It was more than likely made in a Mongolian workshop; the yellow form of Vajrapani is relatively frequently encountered in Mongolia, yet rarely seen in this form in Tibet.









**Thangka of Yama and Yami, Mongolia, 19th century  
pigments on cotton, 16 x 13 cm**

Yama and his sister Yami are usually regarded as the Lords of Death. Yami offers her brother a skull cup filled with wisdom, thereby ensuring his consigning of the dead to the appropriate place in the after-death realm.





**(Scenes of hell), Mongolia, 18th century  
paper with polychrome pigments, 29 x 6 cm each**

These rather gruesome paintings are usually claimed to depict the sufferings sentient beings might undergo in the hell realms as a result of their karmic actions on earth. However, these are not the classical hell torments depicted in the Wheel of Life illustrations, where there are sufferings based upon heat, cold, inability to eat and so on.

These seem to be a particularly Mongolian depiction of a special range of tortures (particularly the lower sheet, extreme right), which are unheard of in Tibetan depictions. However, scenes and tortures have been noted in the lower register of certain scroll paintings of Mongolia's pre-eminent protector, Begtse, in which his entourage of red demons engages in somewhat similar harm to enemies of the Buddhist Dharma.



Set of sixteen *tsakli* paintings of Bardo deities, Tibet, 19th century  
pigments on paper, 11.5 x 8 cm each





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