Elegante Zusammenkunft im Gelehrtengarten
Elegant Gathering in a Scholar's Garden

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Studien zur Ostasiatischen Kunst zu Ehren von Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch

Elegant Gathering in a Scholar's Garden

Studies in East Asian Art in Honor of Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch

Herausgegeben von
Edited by

Annegret Bergmann
Shao-Lan Hertel
Juliane Noth
Antje Papist-Matsuo
Wibke Schrape

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Inhalt

Taklung Thangpa Chenpo or Tashipel seated in the temple of awakening, early 13th century, 39 x 30 cm, private collection

Mirror of the Buddha: An Early Tibetan Portrait

Christian Luczanits

Tibetan Buddhism is known for its "living Buddhas," among them the Fourteenth Dalai Lama reincarnation Tenzin Gyatso (bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho, b. 1935). In Tibetan, these reincarnations are called *tulku* (short for Tibetan *sprul pa'i sku*), a term that translates the Sanskrit word *nirmāṇakāya*. Since the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Buddha Śākyamuni, who lived until approximately 380 BCE, has also been considered one such *nirmāṇakāya,* which denotes an illusory or apparitional body that appears in our world. The *nirmāṇakāya* is understood as a temporal manifestation and display of a higher, absolute Buddha entity whose body is called *dharmakāya*. Although referred to by the same word, a Tibetan *tulku* differs from the *nirmāṇakāya* of a Buddha insofar as his emergence is dependent on the previous existence of the Buddha in the world. The unique early Tibetan portrait that forms the focus of this article provides further clues as to how the Tibetan teacher relates to the Buddha, not only in conceptual terms but also through ritual practice.[1]

The notion of the *tulku* is one of the characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism. As is well known, Buddhism reached Tibet during the Tibetan Empire (seventh to ninth centuries), but from the late tenth to the thirteenth centuries the Tibetans transformed Buddhism into something distinctly their own. A peculiar feature of Tibetan Buddhism is its emphasis on the teacher (Skt. *guru,* Tib. *lama/bla ma*), which led to its somewhat misleading distinction as "Lamaism" in the early literature on the subject. Visual evidence indicates that there was a crucial shift in the emphasis and understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher towards the end of the twelfth century, which only became fully graspable in the thirteenth century. One feature of this shift is characterized by the public promotion of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher as an awakened being, a Buddha, including their connection to prominent earlier representatives of Buddhism through diverse concepts of reincarnation ultimately leading to the first reincarnation lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, that of the Karmapa.

In the arts, this new understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher can be seen in the various images depicting him with characteristics of the Buddha. One of the most telling examples of this is the representation of a Tibetan hierarch teaching inside a temple. The composition roughly references contemporaneous representations of Buddha Śākyamuni's life.[2] In such paintings the central Buddha, seated in the temple that commemorates his awakening at Bodhgaya, is surrounded by scenes depicting

other major events in his life. Furthermore, the depiction of the Seven Buddhas of the Past and the future Buddha Maitreya in the upper corners sets the narrative in the context of the temporal succession of Buddhas in our world. An even closer comparison is offered by a painting of Śākyamuni flanked by two bodhisattvas and the Buddhas of the past and future in the top corners.[3] The double depiction of Śākyamuni as the last Buddha preceding Maitreya among the Seven Buddhas of the Past and in the diverse scenes of his last life indicates a qualitative difference in the events of Buddha's life from grander schemes of buddhahood, such as his position within the chain of successive Buddhas.[4]

The teacher represented in the center of the scroll painting (thangka) is Taklung Thangpa Chenpo, also known as Tashipel (sTag lung Thang pa chen po or bKra shis dpal, 1142–1210), the founder of Taklung Monastery and its first abbot from 1180 to 1210. The Taklung Kagyü School, which originated with him and is named after his monastery, is one of eight schools of Tibetan Buddhism emphasizing oral transmission (Kagyü/bKa' brgyud) in their name. Tashipel, depicted as the youthful looking teacher, occupies the central arch of the temple. He is shown frontally with his right hand on his breast, performing a variant of the argumentation gesture (*vitarkamudrā*). It is only this gesture, the dress of a Tibetan monastic, and the absence of the cranial protuberance (*uṣṇīṣa*) that distinguishes his representation from that of a Buddha. Furthermore, the thin beard embellishing the idealized face of the teacher provides a sense of individuality that is absent from Buddha depictions.

The near equality of the teacher and the Buddha is further emphasized by the two flanking bodhisattvas as well as the elaborate throne. Here, the white Vajrasattva represents prowess in the esoteric tradition and the yellow Mañjuśrī represents wisdom. The teacher's wider context as a living Buddha following Buddha Śākyamuni and preceding the future Buddha Maitreya is referred to in the top corners where the Seven Buddhas of the Past and Bodhisattva Maitreya stand side by side, leaving no doubt that this depiction was modeled on representations of the Buddha's life. The teacher's life is also hinted at by representing him two more times above the flanking bodhisattvas, each time accompanied by a female deity. To the left he meditates besides Green Tārā, a goddess personifying compassion, while to the right he appears to converse with a four-armed goddess. Although the only recognizable attribute of this goddess is the lotus held in her upper left hand, I tend to identify her nevertheless as the goddess Prajñāpāramitā, the personification of the perfection of wisdom.[5] Even though these scenes cannot be identified more precisely, they most likely represent some of the visions the teacher was known for in the context of his school. Together with the bodhisattvas below them, these images also reinforce the central duality of method (represented by the deities on the left) and wisdom (represented by those on the right) that underlies Esoteric Buddhism.

Tashipel did not attain awakening on his own but only in the succession of Buddha Śākyamuni, the Buddha depicted in the top right-hand corner, and his immediate teacher, the highly revered hierarch Phagmodrupa (Phag mo gru pa, 1110–1170), who was considered an awakened being by his disciples[6] and is said to have proclaimed

himself the Buddha of the age.[7] The seated figure in the top tower of the central palace, and thus almost on the same level as the Seven Buddhas of the Past and immediately above Tashipel, is likely meant to represent that teacher. Conceptually he connects the Seven Buddhas of the Past with Tashipel, a position that is also clearly expressed in visual terms through the frame enclosing the top section of the temple structure he is seated in, which in turn links it to the frames used for the Buddhas of the Past.

The painting was likely commissioned by the pupil of Tashipel depicted as a practitioner in the bottom left-hand corner holding the right hand as if holding a *vajra,* the ultimate ritual implement of Esoteric Buddhist practice, and an incense burner. Crucially, to the other side of his ritual paraphernalia, including three *stūpas* on a stand that may refer to the Buddhas of the three times (past, present, and future), is Buddha Śākyamuni. Fortunately, the iconometric anomaly of this Buddha image, a disproportionally large head on a very short and thick neck, leaves no doubt that this earth-touching (*bhūmisparśamudrā*) Buddha is the image that occupied the temple of Bodhgaya at the place of the Buddha's awakening from around the eleventh to the fourteenth century.[8] Thus, in this painting the teacher Tashipel, who is shown within this temple, has literally exchanged place with Buddha Śākyamuni.[9]

The spatial relationship between the practitioner and the main teacher represented in the temple of awakening and the Buddha image from the same temple expresses a ritual practice that is distinctive of Esoteric Buddhism and is emphasized in the Tibetan tradition. In this variant of the visualization ritual, called *guruyoga,* the practitioner imagines his root or main teacher (Skt. *guru,* Tib. *lama/bla ma*) in the place of the aspiration deity (Skt. *iṣṭadevatā,* Tib. *yidam/yi dam*); that is, the teacher from whom he received initiation to the practice of the ritual itself. In this case, the aspiration deity is the Buddha at the moment of his awakening at Bodhgaya, an event that is represented to the practitioner's side just opposite the ritual implements; thus, Tashipel replaces the Buddha also in ritual terms.

The dynamic triangle of the practitioner, the teacher, and the aspiration deity centered on the ritual paraphernalia permeates the stark division of the painting's composition into two horizontal registers through a double layer of stylized rocks. It separates the mundane lower area from the supra-mundane palace above that merely references, rather than depicts, the awakening of Buddha Śākyamuni at Bodhgaya sometime in the fifth century BCE.[10] Instead, one may read the top section as representing the fundamental principles of buddhahood as they are perceived in a Tibetan Buddhist context, in which the teacher takes precedence over the Buddha in terms of immediate practice but has also attained his elevated status through his relation to a historical Buddha. The historicity of that Buddha, in turn, is expressed by depicting him on the mundane level in a position otherwise reserved for deities representing subsidiary practices.

On the mundane level, taking refuge in the Buddha in both his historicity and as a representative of a Buddha principle, especially the Buddha at the crucial moment of the awakening that signifies the release from the cycle of rebirth, is a prerequisite for

any Buddhist practitioner. But favorable conditions in this life are equally important, as is signaled by the three wrathful deities located to the side of the Buddha. Among these, the central Vajrapāṇi may be read as standing for ritual power, the Black Jambhala to his left for abundance of material wealth, and the two-armed Mahākāla to the right for the removal of obstacles; all three are required for an unhampered focus on Buddhist practice. Thus, this painting communicates the tenets of Tibetan Buddhist devotional and esoteric ritual practice as well as the position of the teacher within it.

There are other paintings of the same teacher that support this interpretation. A well-known painting of Tashipel in the Musée des Arts Asiatiques Guimet in Paris depicts him, along with his footprints and the aspiration deity, on a common lotus base protected by a peacock umbrella.[11] In South Asia and neighboring cultures the veneration of the feet is an expression of utmost devotion, and ever since the very earliest forms of Buddhist art, the Buddha's footprints have been the subjects of veneration.[12] Numerous other paintings show Tashipel frontally and performing the teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).[13]

The explicit relationship between the practitioner and the depicted also has direct implications for the painting's attribution. The unidentified practitioner must have met Tashipel during his lifetime. Indeed, there are a few indications that this painting may be counted among the earliest works within the corpus of Taklung School paintings, the most noteworthy among these being the unusual depiction of Tashipel's robes. Similar teacher representations with the mantel falling around the legs in a wide bow and a rim somewhat illogically painted along the outer edge around the knees, are only found on a very few other early examples such as a Vajravārāhī mandala, which is generally considered to be of or close to Tashipel's lifetime.[14] Along with a few other criteria, this curious detail allows us to safely attribute the painting to the first decades of the thirteenth century.[15]

To conclude, the painting presented is one of the most explicit examples of promoting the Tibetan Buddhist teacher as an awakened being. Moreover, it is exceptional in that it also places him in direct relation to the historical Buddhas of the past. In this conception, the teacher is an embodiment of buddhahood (*tulku*) in the succession of the Buddhas in our world (*nirmāṇakāya*). The visual record maintains that although his appearance, teachings, and life mirror those of the Buddha they would not be possible without him.

1 The painting has previously been published in Steven M. Kossak: *Painted Images of Enlightenment: Early Tibetan Thankas, 1050–1450.* Mumbai: Mārg, 2010: fig. 56; David Paul Jackson: *Mirror of the Buddha: Early Portraits from Tibet.* New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011: fig. 5.20, and in the detail at the beginning of that chapter (p. 132) where it was attributed to the early fourteenth century but was not explained in detail. The title *Mirror of the Buddha* for the latter publication was used at my suggestion; the catalogue is used as the main reference for comparative material.

2 For depictions of this type showing Buddha Śākyamuni at his awakening in Bodhgaya surrounded by other events of his life, see in particular Claudine Bautze-Picron: "The Elaboration of a Style: Eastern Indian Motifs and Forms in Early Tibetan (?) and Burmese Painting," Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter/Eva Allinger, eds.: *The Inner Asian International Style, 12th–14th Centuries: Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995.* Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998, 15–65. Examples discussed in this study or similar ones are also published in, for example, Steven M. Kossak/Jane Casey Singer: *Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet.* New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998: no. 27; Pratapaditya Pal: *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure.* Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with the University of California Press and Mapin Publishing, 2003: no. 121.

3 This thangka, published in Bautze-Picron 1998: fig. 1, and Jackson 2011: fig. 1.12, also came from a Taklung context, as it features a re-consecration inscription of Sangye Önpo (see n. 15).

4 Nominally, both depictions would be classified as representing the *nirmāṇakāya,* but it is likely that here the Buddhas in the top row are to be understood as a higher form of the Buddha that displays the life, even though this higher form cannot be identified as *saṃbhogakāya.*

5 This assumes that the attributes have not been painted in at all and that the lotus was meant to support the book, her identifying attribute.

6 The clearest visual expressions of this belief are found in two objects in the Cleveland Museum of Art, a painting that shows Phagmodrupa in the crown of Buddha Vairocana (http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1989.104 [December 15, 2014]; Jackson 2011: fig. 6.7), a place otherwise reserved for superior manifestations, and a bronze showing him touching the earth, as the Buddha did at his awakening (http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1993.160 [December 15, 2014]; David Weldon/Jane Casey Singer: *The Sculptural Heritage of Tibet: Buddhist Art in the Nyingjei Lam Collection.* London: Laurence King, 1999: figs. 50, 51; Jackson 2011: 137, fig. 5.3). On the Cleveland website, the teacher is erroneously identified as Lama Rinchen-Pel (1143–1217) in reference to the second verse of the inscription that simply refers to the "precious guru" (*bla ma rin chen*) as the fourth refuge besides the Buddha, the dharma, and the monastic community (see, for example, the discussion of this painting in Jackson 2011: 138) and the expression of the importance of the teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

7 George N. Roerich: *The Blue Annals: Deb-Ther Sngon-Po.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988: 552. By contrast, from the story of his life as told in Khenpo Könchog Gyaltsen: *The Great Kagyu Masters: The Golden Lineage Treasury.* Ithaca: Snow Lion Publication, 1990: 205–63, it appears that his pupil Jigten Gönpo introduced this notion (cf. in particular p. 206). The latter also wrote a hagiography of his teacher.

8 See Jane Casey Singer: "Tibetan Homage to Bodh Gaya," *Orientations,* vol. 32, no. 10, 2001, 44–51.

9 It is thus only fitting that in visions of his disciples, Tashipel has also occasionally been perceived as Buddha Śākyamuni, a vision also depicted on the footprint painting and other representations of Tashipel (see Jackson 2011: 108 and figs. 4.2, 4.7, 4.11, 4.12, 4.13, 4.14).

10 This date refers to the short chronology, according to which Buddha Śākyamuni lived until c. 380 BCE.

11 See, for example, Jane Casey Singer: "Early Portrait Painting in Tibet," K.R. van Kooij/H. van der Veere, eds.: *Function and Meaning in Buddhist Art: Proceedings of a Seminar Held at Leiden University, 21–24 October 1991.* Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995: pl. 36; Gilles Béguin: *Art Ésotérique de l'Himâlaya: La Donation Lionel Fournier.* Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990: 20, pl. 2; Gilles Béguin: *Les Peintures du Bouddhisme Tibétain.* Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1995: no. 143; Kathryn H. Selig Brown: *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art.* Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004: fig. 17; Jackson 2011: fig. 4.2 (detail on p. 104).

12 On Tibetan footprint paintings and their Indian predecessors, see Selig Brown 2004.

13 See, for example, Jackson 2011: figs. 5.14–5.17, 5.19.

14 For this mandala, see Béguin 1990: 173, pl. D; Jackson 2011: fig. 4.4. Another painting featuring a similar rim around the knees without indication of folds is focused on two Kadampa School teachers (see Kossak/Singer 1998: no. 11; Jackson 2011: fig. 2.13, who attributes it to the twelfth century).

15 The dates of Taklung paintings are generally contested, depending on the historical scenario one favors and how much one takes into consideration the inscriptions on the back. Among the other features indicating an early date are the bold flower roundels decorating the cape, which show the flower in profile, the outer decoration of the head nimbus evolving from the tail of a bird not reaching the top of the nimbus, the peculiar seat of the practitioner in the bottom left corner, and the alternation of background color in the bottom row. Independent of that, a date in the fourteenth century, as suggested in the previous publications, is impossible as a secondary inscription on the back of the painting attests to a consecration, or rather a re-consecration, by the Taklung hierarch Sangye Önpo (Sangs rgyas dbon po, 1251–1296), who was abbot of Taklung monastery (1272–73) before moving to eastern Tibet and founding Riwoche monastery there in 1276 (tenure at Riwoche 1276–1296). Thus, one may assume that this painting was one of the "relics" taken by Önpo from Taklung to Riwoche in 1273.