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Establishing an Iconography — The Case of Early Tibetan Representations of the Medicine Buddhas¹

Christian Luczanits

ABSTRACT: Taking the depictions of the Medicine Buddhas in the iconographic program of a fourteenth century Sūtra Collection at Namgyal Monastery, Upper Mustang, as a point of departure, this study surveys roughly contemporaneous representations of the same theme to assess the importance of iconographic conventions at that time. It concludes, that the depictions of the Medicine Buddhas indicate considerable iconographic freedom that may be characteristic for Tibetan Buddhist art of the fourteenth century in general, at least in areas that can be considered peripheral. This flexibility stands in contrast — and may well have been a contributing factor — to the contemporaneous efforts to systematize the Buddhist teachings in encyclopedic works of art and literature. The study, further, demonstrates how an iconographic convention may have been established when the canonical sources do not provide enough detail, as well as the relative importance of such conventions within the Tibetan Buddhist context.

¹ This study — dedicated to the memory of Guge Tsering Gyalpo — is one of the outcomes of the AHRC research project on *Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today*, which enabled both relevant field research and the participation in the Seventh International Conference on Tibetan Archaeology and Art, which took place at Sichuan University, October 19-21, 2018. I am grateful to the monks of Namgyal Monastery, and in particular to its abbot Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin, for entrusting the study of their collection to me. Further I am grateful to the late Guge Tsering Gyalpo, Helmut and Heidi Neumann, as well as Tom and Margot Pritzker for providing images relevant for this study.

Introduction

We are all using iconographic handbooks to identify Buddhist deities. For Tibetan Buddhist art these are either based on the few Sanskrit sources that contain such information collected in such works as de Mallmann's *Introduction à l'Iconographie du Tânrisme Bouddhique* (de Mallmann 1986), or on inscribed pantheons usually produced from the 17th century onwards. Most useful among the latter is Willson and Brauen 2000, but there are many others, often using the same sources.² Together, they convey the impression that the only thing we have to do, is to find the deity we are looking for in them to identify it.

However, relying on such sources is misleading in several respects and does not account for the fact that Tibetan Buddhist iconography is the result of a complex adoption and adaptation process that allows for, and results in considerable leeway for interpretation. In addition, Tibetan scholars worked diligently to make up for details that their own sources did not provide, and at times this process was repeated several times in the different Tibetan Buddhist schools and/or at different time periods. In fact, each encyclopaedic monument, the earliest preserved of which is the three storied temple of Wanla,³ aims at representing the current Tibetan pantheon in a systematic and hierarchic arrangement, and thus represents a manifestation of this process, but the iconographic details found in them may differ. One purpose of such a monument was precisely to establish iconographic conventions according to sources considered authentic and based on the expertise of an established scholar.

But how were iconographic details established before such a canonisation of iconography happened and why was this canonisation important? One answer to these questions is offered by this case study of the earliest depictions of the Medicine Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhist art.

An Interesting Case

I had no intention to work on depictions of the Medicine Buddhas until I tried to identify the Buddha representations in an illuminated Sūtra Collection (*mdo sde*) from Namgyal Monastery

2 As additional sources I list here only those used as comparisons for this short study: Chandra 1991; Chandra 1999, Chandra and Sharma 2015.

3 The term “encyclopedic monuments” refers to monuments the decoration of which attempts to represent the full Tibetan Buddhist pantheon of the time in an hierarchical arrangement. Better known such monuments are the diverse painted Kumbum chörten, most famous and best preserved among them the one at Gyantse (see Tucci 1941; Tucci 1989; Lo Bue and Ricca 1990; Ricca and Lo Bue 1993). On Wanla see Luczanits 2002; Kozicz 2002; Neuwirth and Auer 2015; Tropper 2015. A draft version of my detailed study of its iconography is available on my website (luczanits.net).

in Upper Mustang, Nepal.⁴ Namgyal Monastery in the vicinity of the region's capital, Lo Manthang, has been considerably expanded in the second quarter of the 15th century under Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po, 1382-1456), the charismatic founder of the Ngor sub-school of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism.⁵ Going back to this expansion and the merging of three monasteries at the time, Namgyal has a remarkable collection of sculptures and an impressive library.⁶ The latter includes a considerable number of ancient books preceding the time of Ngorchen, most important among them an almost complete Sūtra Collection that can be attributed to the first half of the fourteenth century.⁷

The Sūtra Collection is to my knowledge the earliest Tibetan Buddhist manuscript collection with an illumination programme across the entire collection. It consisted of originally thirty-one volumes of which twenty-nine are extant at Namgyal. There are four illuminations in each volume, two on the first folio verso and two on the last folio recto. The details of the collection and the illumination programme can be reconstructed as outlined here:

Sūtra Collection (*mdo sde*)

- twenty-nine volumes (*ka* to *a*)
- two volumes missing (*ma* and *ha*) and one double (*nya*), but the second version without illuminations

Illumination programme:

- Volume *ka*, first folio verso: Śākyamuni and Prajñāpāramitā; two illuminations
- Nine Volumes (*ka* last folio recto to *ta*): Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā*; 34 illuminations
- Seven Volumes (*tha* to *ma*): Life of the Buddha; 30 illuminations
- Five Volumes (*tsa* to *zha*): Buddhas; 20 illuminations
- Eight Volumes (*za* to *a*): Deities; 32 illuminations⁸

The part under concern for the topic of this essay are the five volumes and twenty illuminations of Buddha representations. Of these, the first five illuminations depict the five esoteric Buddhas beginning with Vairocana and Akṣobhya on the first folio verso of volume

4 The documentation and study of this collection is integrative part of an AHRC funded research project on “Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today” (2016-2019).

5 On the life and activities of Ngorchen, including those at Namgyal Monastery, see the excellent study by Heimbel 2017.

6 See Luczanits 2016b; Luczanits 2016a for a short history of the monastery and a survey of its collection.

7 A detailed study of this Sūtra Collection, as well as an illuminated *Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* in fourteen volumes from the same period, are the subject of a monographic study by Markus Viehbeck and this author which is forthcoming (Luczanits and Viehbeck).

8 These include Bodhisattvas, goddesses and wrathful deities, as well as Padmasambhava towards the end of the programme.

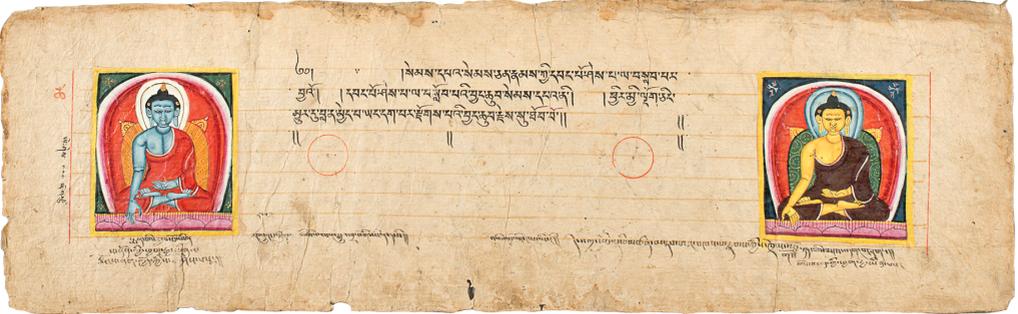
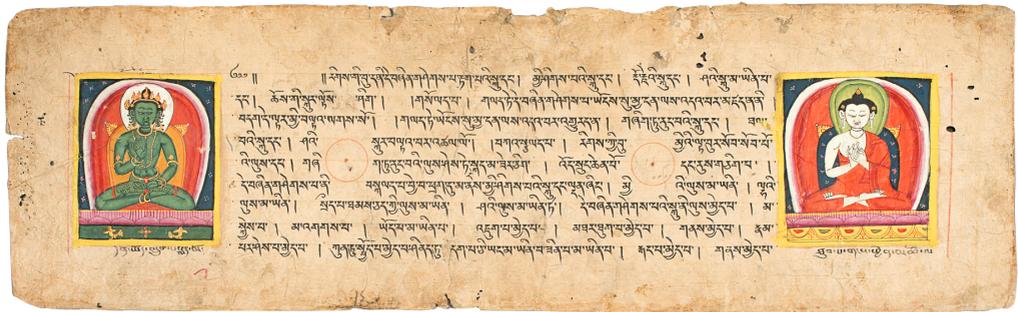


Fig. 1 Illuminations of volume *tsha* with Amoghasiddhi and the first three of the Seven Successive Buddhas; first folio verso and last folio recto; Namgyal Monastery (Photo: J. Poncar & C. Luczanits 2015 D0579).



Fig. 2 Buddha Vipasyin (Nampar Zikpa, rnam par gzigs pa) identified by caption as Snow-Lake Buddha (Gangchen Tsogyel, gangs chen mtsho rgyal); sūtra volume *tsha*; first folio verso, right illumination; Namgyal Monastery (Photo: J. Poncar & C. Luczanits 2015 D0581).



Fig. 3 Illuminations of volume *dza* with four of the Seven Successive Buddhas, including Buddha Śākyamuni represented last; first folio verso and last folio recto; Namgyal Monastery (Photo: J. Poncar & C. Luczanits 2015 D5143).

tsa. The last folio of this volume has been replaced by a more recent one, the depictions of Ratnasambhava and Amitābha are thus not extant anymore. The other fifteen Buddhas, following Amoghasiddhi, on the left side of the first folio verso of volume *tsha*, are all Buddhas in monastic robes, the first three of them represented like the esoteric Buddhas in terms of colour and gesture (Fig. 1).

By the time I studied these it has become clear that the captions underneath some of them are not reliable, or to formulate it better, in case of doubt more often wrong than not. For example, the caption under the first Buddha in monastic robes on the first folio verso of volume *tsha* refers to the so called Snow-Lake Buddha (Gangchen Tsogyel, gangs chen mtsho rgyal; Fig. 2), a form of Vairocana depicted, among others, in the centre of the back wall of the main chapel of the Lhasa Jokhang⁹ and at Drathang.¹⁰ But what about the red Buddha holding a vase in contemplation on the first folio verso of volume *dza* (Fig. 3) and those following him? Clearly there must be another way to identify these Buddhas.

Luckily, the number fifteen leaves few options if considering common Buddha groups.

9 Warner 2008: 226, 237, 244, 389-90.

10 Heller 2002 or Henss 2014: 355. See also Sørensen 1994: 60-66, on the legendary origin of this Buddha.



Fig. 4 Illuminations of volume *zha* with four of the Eight Medicine Buddhas, including Buddha Śākyamuni represented last; first folio verso and last folio recto; Namgyal Monastery (Photo: J. Poncar & C. Luczanits 2015 D2426).

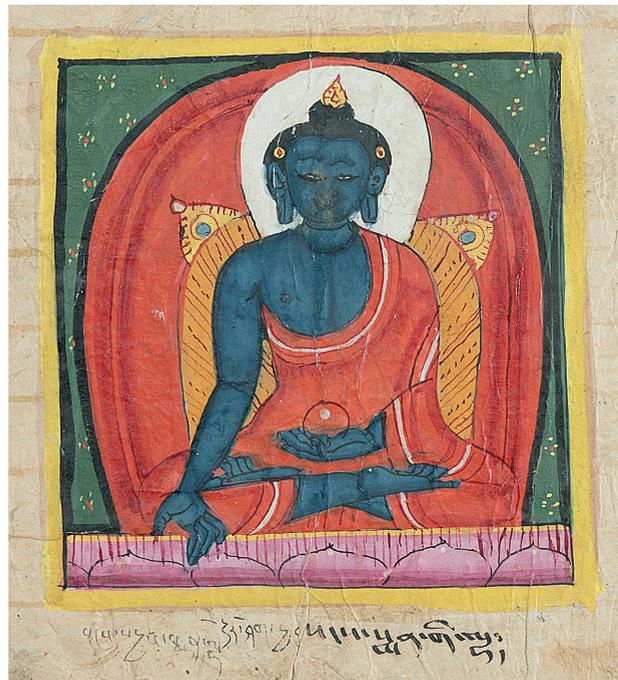


Fig. 5 Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru; *sūtra* volume *zha*; last folio recto, left illumination; Namgyal Monastery (Photo: J. Poncar & C. Luczanits 2015 D2429).

Dividing it in two groups, one of seven and one of eight Buddhas, not only makes fifteen, but also has the advantage that the group of seven complements that of the five esoteric Buddhas to fill the illuminations of three volumes. That the last of these seven performs the earth-touching gesture and is yellow supports this reading. He is Śākyamuni, the last of the group of the Seven Successive Buddhas (Sanggyé Rapdün, sangs rgyas rabs bdun), namely Śākyamuni and his six predecessors (Fig. 3).¹¹ Śākyamuni has also been recognised by the person adding the graffiti to that Buddha image.

The second group of eight Buddhas provides a similar clue at the end of the group through the last two Buddhas, namely a blue Buddha with begging bowl (*pātra*) and one repeating the iconography of Śākyamuni (Fig. 4). The blue Buddha thus is the Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru, even if he misses the fruit in his right hand as an additional attribute (Fig. 5), and the second group of eight Buddhas must be the Medicine Buddhas concluding with Śākyamuni. But can they actually be identified individually on the basis of their iconography?

Medicine Buddhas

With this question in mind I started to review more or less contemporaneous depictions of the Medicine Buddhas to learn about their iconography. This group is rather popular in fourteenth century monuments across the Western Himalayas, there is thus plenty of comparative material associated with the emergence of Highest Yoga Tantra topics in the region.¹²

A good example is the so-called Lhakhang Soma (New Temple) at Alchi (Fig. 6), where the Medicine Buddha occupies the centre of the right wall of the monument — which is also the east wall — surrounded by repeated depictions of Buddha Akṣobhya.¹³ Among those Akṣobhya are also slightly larger Buddhas in two groups, but none of them can clearly be identified as representing the other Medicine Buddhas. At Kanji, also in Lower Ladakh, the Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru is featured among the three sculptures along the main wall. Here he is flanking Ṣaḍakṣara Lokeśvara together with Green Tārā.¹⁴ In these cases the focus is on Bhaiṣajyaguru alone.

Complete representations of the Seven Medicine Buddhas and Śākyamuni are found in

11 Another term frequently used for them in primary sources is Seven Heroic Buddha — Sanggyé Pawo Dün, sangs rgyas dpa' bo bdun.

12 Potentially the earliest depiction of the Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru, and possibly the other Medicine Buddhas, is found in the Cella of the Tabo Main Temple, but here it is just a name added to a “thousand Buddha” theme depiction, see Luczanits 1999: 137-41, and the captions may not be original to the depictions either.

13 See also Genoud and Inoue 1982, Alchi, fig. 13.

14 See the description in Stoddard 2007: 260-61, and Skedzuhn et al. 2018: 207-209, fig. 3.



Fig. 6 Medicine Buddha Bhaisajyaguru in a central panel of the left side wall of the Lhakhang Soma, Alchi, Ladakh; second quarter of the 14th century (Photo: C. Luczanits 1998 (108,48), WHAV).



Fig. 7 Medicine Buddha panel on the left side of the main wall, Wanla; ca. 1300 (Photo: C. Luczanits 2003 12,03).



Fig. 8 Medicine Buddha panel on the right side wall of the Senggé Lhakhang in Lamayuru; late 13th century (Photo: C. Luczanits 1998 (53,21) WHAV).



Fig. 9 Eight Medicine Buddhas on the right side wall of Alchi Shangrong; first half of the 14th century (Photo: C. Luczanits 2009 digitally merged).

two forms, in one type they are shown in a single panel, often in a composition that replicates a thangka painting. The depiction at Khorchak published in Neumann and Neumann 2010a would fit this type, but it is too fragmentary to be included in the discussion of the iconographic details of the Buddhas below. The one in Wanla, depicted in Fig. 7, is outstanding among them as it combines this theme with a temple depiction usually reserved for Śākyamuni, who in this case sits right above Bhaiṣajyaguru in the stūpa on top of the temple. The composition at the Senggé Lhakhang of Lamayuru is also severely damaged (Fig. 8) but represents the most common variant as there are also numerous thangka paintings of similar composition roughly dating to the same period.¹⁵ These compositions share that they represent a full deity

15 See the thangka example discussed in Neumann and Neumann 2010a as well as HAR n.d., Buddhist Deity: Medicine Buddha Main Page (<https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=213>), accessed May 15, 2009. Heller 2012 discusses a later painting and superficially compares it with depictions in monuments also used in this study.



Fig. 10 Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni, detail of Fig. 9 (Photo: C. Luczanits 2009 D9814).

assembly of Bhaiṣajyaguru including the sixteen Bodhisattvas, yakṣa generals, guardians of the directions, and the Four Great Kings.

In the second type of depiction the emphasis is laid on the group of eight Buddhas, such as in the poorly preserved, but historically very important temple of Alchi Shangrong (Fig. 9).¹⁶ As in the Lhakhang Soma it is the right side wall that is dedicated to the Medicine Buddhas. The Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru himself and Śākyamuni are represented at the end of the row succeeding each other, Śākyamuni referencing his awakening and Menla (*sman bla*) seated on a lion throne (Fig. 10). Puzzlingly, there is no trace of blue on Bhaiṣajyaguru's body, but the attributes leave no doubt about his identity. Blue is actually preserved elsewhere in the temple, therefore the colour of the Buddha can not be attributed to a simple loss of an organic colourant, as is the case with green and yellow. The iconographic details included in the comparative list below includes the vehicle and the symbol on the throne cloth, as they differ for each Buddha.

¹⁶ The inscribed depiction of the 80 Mahāsiddha represented in this temple allowed for the identification of a distinct Drigung version of this popular group (Luczanits 2015: 247-250).



Fig. 11 Six of the Eight Medicine Buddhas on the umbrella of the Luri stūpa, Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni at the back (Photo: J. Poncar 1993).

Unusual is also that the first of the Buddhas is slightly larger than all the others, and that it is neither Bhaiṣajyaguru nor Śākyamuni who is emphasised. There are no captions identifying the Buddhas, their identification used below thus assumes that they are to be read from left to right.

Closer to Namgyal, the Luri cave depicts the Eight Medicine Buddhas on the umbrella of its extremely sophisticated stūpa dating to around 1300 (Fig. 11).¹⁷ The Buddhas are to be read from left to right ending with Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni, the only two Buddhas not visible on this photograph. They are thus depicted in a clockwise succession roughly beginning in the west, but they are not strictly aligned with the cardinal directions, even though that would have been easy to do.

In the cave of Pangdrapuk (*pang gra phug*) the Medicine Buddhas are even more prominently depicted (Fig. 12).¹⁸ Flanking the goddess Prajñāpāramitā they are shown on

17 On the Luri cave see Gutschow 1994; Neumann 1994; Neumann 1997; Neumann and Neumann 2010b. A full documentation of this cave combining photos of Philip Lieberman and Jaroslav Poncar is available on my website (luczanits.net).

18 On this cave see Neumann and Neumann 2011. Photographs of this depiction have kindly been provided by Helmut and Heidi Neumann.



Fig. 12 Eight Medicine Buddhas flanking Prajñāpāramitā on the main wall of Pangdrapuk (Photo: H. & H. Neumann 2007).

the main wall above the five esoteric Buddhas headed by Vairocana. Here, too, the Buddhas have to be read from left to right with Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni ending the group in the upper right. Further, in the cave of Wachen (*wa chen*), Prajñāpāramitā heads the Buddhas on the left side wall, but here they are to be read from right to left, against the direction of circumambulation.¹⁹ The Gyatsa Temple at Tholing even had one of its main chapels dedicated to clay sculptures of the Eight Medicine Buddhas, but there is no documentation of them.²⁰

The most important example, however, is found in the cave of Bardzong, also called Pargarbu,²¹ as here the deities are accompanied by captions, which have been published in detail by Tsering Gyalpo Tsering Gyalpo (ལྷ་གེ་ཚེ་རིང་རྒྱལ་པོ་) 2014 and Zhang Changhong

19 The documentation of the Wachen cave was kindly provided by Guge Tsering Gyalpo.

20 See Vitali 1999: 83-90, for a reconstruction of the iconographic program of the Tholing Gyatsa. A recent article by Wang Ruilei and Ren Yunjuan 2018, kindly pointed out to me by Zhang Changhong, also identifies painted Buddhas on two photographs taken by Eugenio Ghersi and published in Klimburg-Salter 1997, figs. 4 and 5, as representing the Medicine Buddhas. Their original location remains uncertain.

21 Huo Wei 霍巍 2003. The photographs of the cave used here have been taken in 2007 and kindly been provided by Tom and Margot Pritzker.



Fig. 13 Prajñāpāramitā and the first four of the Medicine Buddhas on the left side wall of the Bardzong cave (Photo: T. Pritzker 2007).

张长虹 2016 and 2018, leaving no doubt about the identity of the figures. In this cave, the Eight Medicine Buddhas are distributed on both side walls, the left wall depictions (Fig. 13) preceding those of the right wall (Fig. 14). The Buddhas are identified by praises in verse form written underneath them and the group is introduced with “*worship to the seven tathāgata*”. The text references the praises of the Medicine Buddhas, which are directly from the canonical text *The Rite of Reciting the Incantation of the Particularly Extensive Former Aspirations of the Seven Sugatas, Compiled from the Sūtra* (*de bzhin gshegs pa bdun gyi sngon gyi smon lam gyi khyad par rgyas pa'i gzungs bklag pa'i cho ga mdo sde las btus pa*; T 3133).²² The same verses occur in the *Praise of the Eight Tathāgata* (*de bzhin gshegs pa brgyad la bstod pa*, T 1166), but as the introduction to the quoted verses only mentions seven Buddhas, even though eight are depicted, I assume this text has not been the direct source. Here I cite the full verses from the

²² This text is summarised in Dorje 2014, but the homage translated there is from elsewhere.

ACIP edition of text T 3133, pages 294B-295A, as we will reference it in the discussion of the Buddhas' iconography later on.²³

མཚན་གྱི་མེ་ཉོག་རྒྱས་པས་དག་པ་ལ། །དཔེ་བྱད་བཟང་པོའི་འབྲུ་ཆགས་མཛེས་པའི་སྐྱུ། །གང་གིས་མཛོང་ཚོས་
 དྲན་པའི་དཔལ་གྱུར་པའི། །སྟོན་པ་མཚན་ལེགས་དཔལ་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །
 རིན་ཆེན་ཟླ་དང་པ་རྣམས་རབ་བརྒྱན་ཞིང་། །ཤེས་བྱ་ཀུན་ལ་ཆགས་པའི་སྐྱུགས་མངའ་ལ། །རྒྱ་མཚོ་ལྷ་བྱུར་ཟབ་པའི་
 སྐྱུ་མངའ་བ། །སྐྱ་དབྱངས་རྒྱལ་པོ་བྱུང་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །
 འཇམ་བུ་རྒྱ་བོའི་གསེར་ལྷར་ལྷང་དེ་བ། །ཉི་མ་སྟོང་བས་ལྷག་པའི་གཟི་བརྒྱུད་འབར། །དྲི་མེད་གསེར་གྱི་མཚོད་
 རྫོང་ལྷ་བྱུའི་སྐྱུ། །གསེར་བཟངས་དྲི་མེད་དེ་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །
 ལྷ་དར་འདས་ཤིང་བདེ་བའི་མཚོག་བརྟེས་པ། །འགྲོ་བའི་སྐྱུག་བཟུལ་གདུང་བ་སེལ་མཛད་པ། །འགྲོ་བྱུག་མགོན་
 དང་དཔལ་དུ་གྱུར་པ་པོ། །ལྷ་དར་མེད་མཚོག་དཔལ་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །
 ཚོས་སྐྱུ་ཆེན་པོས་པ་རོལ་ཤོལ་བ་འཛོམས། །རྒྱ་མཚོ་ལྷ་བྱུར་དངས་པའི་སྐྱུ་མངའ་ཞིང་། །འགྲོ་བའི་དུག་གསུམ་མ་
 ལུས་སེལ་མཛད་པ། །ཚོས་བསྐྱགས་རྒྱ་མཚོའི་དབྱངས་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །
 ཚོས་གྱི་སྟོ་གྲོས་གཉིང་དཔག་དཀའ་བའི་ཚུལ། །རྣམ་དག་ཚོས་གྱི་དབྱིངས་ལ་རོལ་མཛད་དེ། །ཤེས་བྱ་མ་ལུས་
 མངོན་སུམ་གཟིགས་པ་པོ། །མངོན་མཁྱེན་རྒྱལ་པོ་དེ་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །
 འགྲོ་བའི་ནད་གསོ་མཛད་པ་སྐྱུན་པའི་མཚོག་བེ་ལྷུ་ལྷར་དངས་པའི་སྐྱུ་མངའ་ཞིང་། །སྐྱུ་ཡི་འོད་གྱིས་འགྲོ་བ་སྐྱོལ་
 མཛད་[295A] །། །། །སྐྱན་པའི་རྒྱལ་པོ་དེ་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །
 སྐྱན་གྱི་རྣམ་པ་འདི་དག་ནི། །ནད་རྣམས་མ་ལུས་བསལ་བྱའི་ཕྱིར། །བདེ་གཤེགས་སྐྱུན་གྱི་སྐྱེ་མ་འབྲུལ། །ཡོན་
 བདག་དོན་དུ་བཞེས་སུ་གསོལ། །
 ཐབས་མཁས་ཐུགས་རྗེ་ཤུག་འཛིན་པའི་འཇམ་བུ་རྒྱུའི་རིགས་འཇམ་བུ་ཤིང་། །གཞན་གྱིས་མི་ཐུབ་བདུད་གྱི་དཔུང་འཛོམས་པ། །གསེར་གྱི་
 ལྷན་པོ་ལྷ་བྱུར་མཛེས་པའི་སྐྱུ། །ཤུག་འཛིན་རྒྱལ་པོ་དེ་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །

This popular prayer thus defines the succession of the Medicine Buddhas in depictions that end with Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni.

At Bardzong, there are four Buddhas on each side in rows of two and to be read from left to right and top to bottom. They all sit on lion-thrones and are flanked by two Bodhisattvas each, but the symbol on the throne cloth changes. The blue Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni end the group of Buddhas, as is expected from the order of the praises. The vajra represented on the throne-cloth of Śākyamuni refers to his awakening.

The Bardzong depiction actually contains a full maṅḍala assembly consisting of at least fifty-three deities. This assembly begins with the goddess Prajñāpāramitā, represented appropriately to the side of the first Buddha at the beginning of the group in a four-armed form (Fig. 13). The sixteen Bodhisattvas are flanking the eight Buddhas. The guardians of the

23 A “translation attempt” of the *Praise of the Eight Tathāgata (de bzhin gshegs pa brgyad la bstod pa, T 1166)* by Bill May is found online: <https://www.bootl.org/html/Santaraksita-astatathagatastotra.htm>, accessed June 4, 2019. Translations of these verses are also included in Panchen Losang Chökyi Gyältsen 2002 under the respective Buddha.

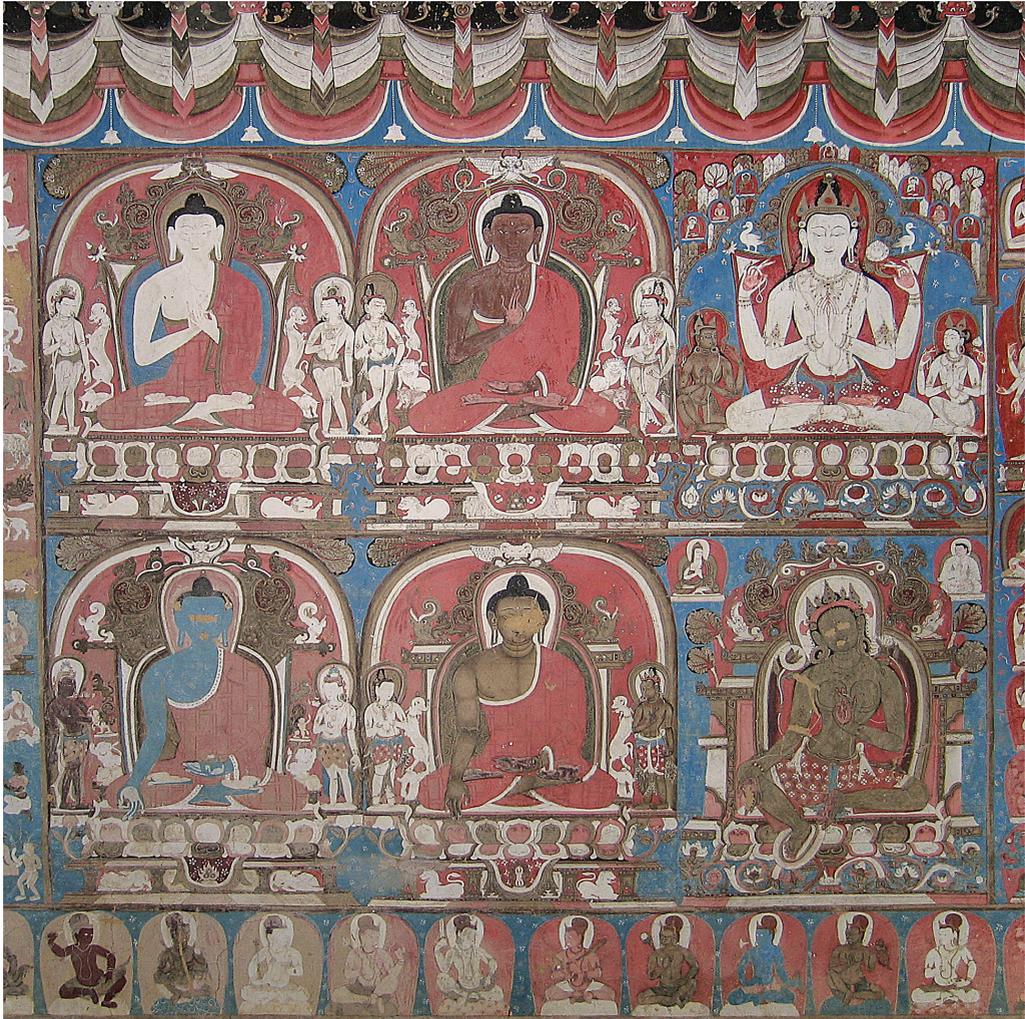


Fig. 14 Four of the Medicine Buddhas together with Ṣaḡakṣara Lokeṣvara triad and Green Tārā on the right side wall of the Bardzong cave (Photo: T. Pritzker 2007).

directions are represented underneath the Buddhas on the left side wall (Fig. 13), Indra and two more deities, Sūrya and Brahmā, both protecting the zenith, commencing an expanded group of twelve deities on the entry wall. The twelve *yakṣa* generals are represented in the bottom row of the right side wall (Fig. 14), and the Four Great Kings complete the assembly on the main wall. Thus, the Medicine Buddha assembly is distributed among all walls of the monument, and while it is not the main theme of the cave, it is the one according to which the space is organised.

The iconography of the eight Buddhas in the Barzong cave is detailed, but the Buddhas'

colours are rather unusual. For example, the first Buddha Sunāman (Tsenlekpel, mtshan legs dpal; top middle figure in Fig. 13) is represented white at Bardzong. The following Buddha, Svaraghoṣarāja (Drayang Gyelpo, sgra dbyangs rgyal po; top right in Fig. 13) is dark brown today, but likely here an organic colourant has lost its colour value and the Buddha was once yellow or orange. This can be concluded from the comparison to the colouring of Prajñāpāramitā (top left in Fig. 13), who is also dark brown today, but must have been yellow or orange originally. Equally, the colour of the third Buddha Suvarṇabhadravimala (Serzang Drimé, gser bzang dri med; bottom centre in Fig. 13) must have been golden once and has the same greenish brown surface today as Śākyamuni (Fig. 14). Thus, when we account for these Buddhas as a source for their iconography we also have to consider possible colour shifts. The value of the depictions therefore can only be judged on the basis of a wider comparison of all early depictions mentioned above.

Comparisons

In the following the first six Medicine Buddhas are listed in the succession and with the names as they occur in the verses quoted above along with alternative names, and the iconographic details as available at each of the sites mentioned. Further, the list includes a thangka published in Neumann and Neumann 2010a: 123-27, fig. 4, as the Buddhas are inscribed on it, and an iconographic description of the Buddhas from Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po.²⁴ I also include the depiction in the *Rinjung Gyatsa (rin 'byung brgya rtsa)*, as found in the version published in Willson and Brauen 2000, nos. 40-48.²⁵ The final entry for each Buddha is from a description translated by Dorje 2014: 136, which appears to represent a version of the Buddhas popular today.²⁶ The examples that deviate most from the others are marked with a star (*) in front of their short description.

24 These are taken from Kun dga' bzang po 199?: 484-485, which offers a detailed description of the entire assembly.

25 This depiction shows Seven Medicine Buddhas on three folios, each of them composed from the centre out. It begins with the Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru flanked by the Bodhisattvas Candrarocana — Datar Nangjé, zla ltar snang byed — and Sūryarocana — Nyitar Nangjé, nyi ltar snang byed — at the expense of Śākyamuni. The two Bodhisattvas are white and orange respectively and have their hands folded in the gesture of offering and worship (*añjalimudrā*). It then shows the Buddhas in reversed order of the list above, if the central Buddha is read before those flanking him left and right.

26 While the extended homages there are embedded in a combination of translation and summary of the canonical permission ritual (*rjes gnang*) *The Rite of Reciting the Incantation of the Particularly Extensive Former Aspirations of the Seven Sugatas, Compiled from the Sūtra (de bzhin gshegs pa bdun gyi sngon gyi smon lam gyi khyad par rgyas pa'i gzungs bklag pa'i cho ga mdo sde las btus pa)* attributed to Śāntarakṣita (725-783), the actual homages are not found in this text but have been complemented from elsewhere. The same iconography is found in Panchen Losang Chökyi Gyältsen 2002.

Sunāman — Tsenlekpel, mtshan legs dpal²⁷

- Alternative names: Sunāmaparikīrtanaśrī — Tsenlek Yongdrakpel, mtshan legs yongs bsgrags dpal; Tsenlek Yongdrak Pelgyi Gyelpo, mtshan legs par yongs bsgrags dpal gyi rgyal po
- Bardzong: white; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*); deer flanking a wheel on throne cloth.
- Pangdrapuk: white; the gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- * Shangrong: light grey (once yellow?); earth touching gesture (*bhūmisparśamudrā*); lion-throne, *triratna* on cloth.
- Wachen: yellow; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- Wanla (top left): yellow; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- * Namgyal: white; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Luri: yellow; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- Kūnga Zangpo: north; gold in colour; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- *Rinjung Gyatsa*: yellow; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- Dorje 2014, 136: gold in colour; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).

Svaraghoṣarāja²⁸ — Drayang Gyelpo, sgra dbyangs rgyal po

- Also: Ratnacandrarāja — Rinchen Dawa Gyelpo, rin chen zla ba rgyal po; Dawa dang Pemé Raptu Gyenpa Khépa Ziji Drayangkyi Gyelpo, zla ba dang/_pad+mas rab tu brgyan pa mkhas pa gzi brjid sgra dbyangs kyi rgyal po
- Bardzong: dark brown (once yellow or orange?); gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*); triple crystal on throne cloth.
- Pangdrapuk: dark brown (once yellow?); gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- * Shangrong: light grey (once yellow?); teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*); elephant-throne, flaming jewel on cloth.
- Wachen: yellow; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- Wanla (top right): yellow, the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- * Namgyal: red; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- Luri: bright yellow; the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Neumann: orange; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Kūnga Zangpo: south; yellow; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- *Rinjung Gyatsa*: orange; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- Dorje 2014, 136: yellow; the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).

Suvarṇabhadravimāla — Serzang Drimé, gser bzang dri med

27 Willson and Brauen 2000: no. 48, leaving out *dpal*.

28 Chandra 1991: no. 2340.

- Also: Suvarṇabhadravimalaratnaprabhāsa — Serzang Drimé Rinchen nang, gser bzang dri med rin chen snang
- Bardzong: greenish brown (originally probably yellow or gold like Śākyamuni); teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*); triple crystal on throne cloth.
- Pangdrapuk: dark brown (once yellow?); teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- * Shangrong: orange red; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*); lion-throne, lotus on cloth.
- Wachen: yellow; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Wanla (middle left): white; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- Namgyal: yellow; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- Luri: yellow; the gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- Neumann: yellow; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- Kūnga Zangpo: south-east; gold; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- *Rinjung Gyatsa*: skin coloured; gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- Dorje 2014, 136: gold; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).

Aśokottamaśrī — Nyangen Méchokpel, mya ngan med mchog dpal

- Also: Aśokottama — Nyangen Méchok, mya ngan med mchog
- Bardzong: pink; the gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*); single jewel on throne cloth.
- Pangdrapuk: pink; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- Shangrong: bright red; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*); peacock-throne, triratna made up of petals on cloth.
- Wachen: red; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- Wanla (middle right): red, gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- Namgyal: red; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- Luri: red; the gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- Neumann: red; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- Kūnga Zangpo: west; pale red; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- *Rinjung Gyatsa*: pale red; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).
- Dorje 2014, 136: pale red; gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*).

Dharmakīrtisāgaraghoṣa — Chödrak Gyatsöyang, chos bsgrags rgya mtsho'i dbyangs

- Also: Dharmakīrtisāgara — Chödrak Gyatso, chos bsgrags rgya mtsho
- Bardzong: white; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*); triple crystal on throne cloth.
- Pangdrapuk: white; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- Shangrong: grey (once yellow?); gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*); lion-throne, triratna on cloth.
- Wachen: white; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- * Wanla (bottom left): blue; earth touching gesture (*bhūmisparśamudrā*).
- Namgyal: red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).

- * Luri: white; the gesture of argumentation (*vitarkamudrā*)
- Neumann: white; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- Künga Zangpo: south-west; pink; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- *Rinjung Gyatsa*: red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Dorje 2014, 136: pink; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).

Abhijñārāja — Ngönkhyen Gyelpo, mngon mkhyen rgyal po

- Name at Bardzong: Khyenpé Gyelpo, mkhyen pa'i rgyal po
- Bardzong: dark brown (once yellow?); gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*); flaming triple jewel on throne cloth.
- Pangdrapuk: dark brown (once yellow?); the gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudrā*).
- * Shangrong: white; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*); lion throne, wheel on cloth.
- Wachen: red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Wanla (bottom right): red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- * Namgyal: yellow; teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*).
- Luri: red; the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Neumann: orange-red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Künga Zangpo: north-west; red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- *Rinjung Gyatsa*: red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).
- Dorje 2014, 136: coral red; gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*).

When we analyse these depictions and descriptions in terms of the iconography of the Buddhas a few patterns become apparent. The principle colour scheme of the Buddhas is dominated by yellow and red, with an occasional white and the blue for the main Buddha contrasting. Even when a colour of a Buddha may be implicit in his name, as in the case of Suvarṇabhadravimala (Serzang Drimé, gser bzang dri med), a golden colour is only postulated by the textual sources, while the depictions use yellow.

Deviations in terms of the gestures performed are found with all Buddhas except for Aśokottamaśrī (Nyangen Méchokpel, mya ngan med mchog dpal), for whom the gesture of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*) is consistently employed. Considering the later descriptions, it is apparent that the gestures of the Buddhas placed in the cardinal directions of a maṇḍala assembly are those of the respective esoteric Buddha, but that the colours only occasionally match with them.²⁹

²⁹ The usage of the gestures of the five esoteric Buddhas for other Buddhas is also attested in other cases. In particular the Buddhas of the ten directions are often depicted with these gestures in two groups of five, as can be observed in a wide range of temples from the mid-eleventh century renovation of Tabo monastery (see Luczanits 1999: 126-135), via the fifteenth century Tupchen Lhakhang (thub chen lha khang) in Lo Manthang to the late seventeenth century Temple of Gönpa Gang at Chuksang in Lower Mustang (see Luczanits 2018).



Fig. 15 Buddhas Suvarṇabhadravimala and Aśokottamaśrī, detail of Fig. 9 (Photo: C. Luczanits 2009 D9814).

If we consider the comparisons with regard to their context, it is clear that full assemblies are iconographically more consistent than depictions of the Buddhas only. Some of the latter depictions, such as Wachen, may derive from the knowledge of such full assemblies, while others, such as Shangrong and Namgyal, have been conceived without that background, resulting in a wider range of alternative iconographies. Of course, in all these cases it has to be assumed that the succession of the Buddhas follows that of the verses of praise, as is confirmed by Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni being represented at the end of the row.

No description I have come along pays attention to the thrones of the Buddhas, their vehicles, or the symbols to be depicted on the throne-cloth, which offer another range of interpretation. As examples, we may consider Buddhas three and four at Shangrong (Fig. 15). On the left is again Buddha Suvarṇabhadravimala (Serzang Drimé, gser bzang dri med) performing the teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*), the lion throne associating well with the teaching Buddha. Equally the meditating Buddha Aśokottamaśrī (Nyangen Méchokpel, mya ngan med mchog dpal) has peacocks in his throne. While the former may be accidental, most of the Shangrong Buddhas have lion thrones, the latter is intentional, associating the meditating

form with Buddha Amitābha, as is also the case in the Namgyal illumination (Fig. 3).

Namgyal Buddhas

In general, the depiction of the Medicine Buddhas on the manuscript folios of the Namgyal Sūtra Collection conveys the impression that the iconography of the Buddhas has not yet been fully established. The deviations are at times so severe that it makes one assume that the wrong Buddhas have been taken as a model, which is not impossible in a workshop context.

There may be two issues at hand here: on the one hand the planners/artists were less concerned about the individual iconography of these Buddhas beyond their number and general order, on the other hand there is some indication for iconography at the periphery being practiced less strictly, especially in the fourteenth century. In Mustang this precedes the rise of the Mustang kingdom as a regional power centre and the normative influence of Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po.

At Namgyal the iconographic aberrations are further exasperated by a workshop context that also lead to some other anomalies, such as the chronological mixup of the scenes around and after the awakening of the Buddha. Similarly confused narratives of the Buddha's life can be found in some of the regional monuments of Ladakh as well, such as the Lhakhang Soma at Alchi. In both cases not only the sequence of events is in disarray, but at times the scenes cannot even be identified with any certainty.³⁰

At Namgyal, it is thus only the sequence of the Buddhas itself that allows us to identify them, while we can assume that the iconographic details of the first six Buddhas in the set were not considered that important. It is the first of the Medicine Buddhas, Sunāman (Tsenlekpel, mtshan legs dpal), that is probably the most confusing, but only the way the hand is turned distinguishes him from the present appearance of the first Buddha in Alchi Shangrong. This is accidental due to the colour loss of the Shangrong Buddha, which adds a further difficulty to the mix.

The captioner of the Namgyal illuminations did not recognise the set of Buddhas depicted, and thus identified them by their iconography only, which in the case of Aśokottamaśrī (Nyangen Méchokpel, mya ngan med mchog dpal) led to the identification as Amitābha. Understanding the organisation and the set is, thus, vital for fourteenth century depictions at the periphery, only then can the subjects be understood properly. However, we may also surmise that making what is depicted understandable was not a great priority in such regional centres as the one in which

³⁰ An account of the Buddha's Life in this monument will be offered in a forthcoming publication on Alchi monastery. For another example see in particular Martin 2011.

the Namgyal Sūtra Collection was produced. What counts is the presence of the Medicine Buddhas as representatives of salvific buddhahood.

This likely is indicative of the Namgyal illumination programme as a whole, as iconographic issues are found throughout the themes depicted. In Mustang this changed with the emergence of the Mustang kingdom and the establishment of the Ngor School in the region. The idiosyncratic practices preceding his time in this regional context may also have motivated Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po to pay great attention to iconographic details in his writing and thus to establish a more consistent iconography, as he does with his text cited above. His establishments in Mustang, and in particular the Maitreya Temple in Lo Manthang can also be understood that way. It is — or better was³¹ — an encyclopaedia of Buddhist iconography as reimagined by Ngorchen.

Establishing a Convention

This example of the Medicine Buddhas also offers a glance on the establishment of an iconographic convention. While the sample of fourteenth century depictions and their comparisons presented cannot be considered representative, it nevertheless offers interesting insight into some of the steps that led to establish the Medicine Buddha's iconography.

The canonical sources offer iconographical details for Bhaiṣajyaguru and Śākyamuni only, while there is little specific information on the appearance of the other Buddhas. The verses cited above are interesting in this regard as some of them specifically talk about the respective Buddha's body. They obviously imply a golden colour for Suvarṇabhadravimala (Serzang Drimé, gser bzang dri med) and also a teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*) for Dharmakīrtisāgaraghoṣa (Chödrak Gyatsöyang, chos bsgrags rgya mtsho'i dbyangs), and both these characteristics have been used for these Buddhas, but other possible associations from their figurative description have not been employed.

Among the comparisons above Shangrong and Namgyal have clearly been created independently as their iconography diverges much more than that of other representations. It is the maṇḍala assembly that first must have contributed to a certain degree of iconographic consistency. While conceptually all the buddha-fields of the Medicine Buddhas are in the east, in the maṇḍala assembly they are placed on the petals of a lotus around Prajñāpāramitā³² or the

31 On the restorations of Maitreya Temple in Lo Manthang and its effect on the monument as a repository of iconography see Luczanits 2013, Luczanits 2014.

32 As is the case in Kun dga' bzang po 199?, in which Śākyamuni is placed into the eastern direction. See HAR n.d., nos. 902, 89798, for early maṇḍalas with a figured representation of Prajñāpāramitā in the centre, in other examples she is represented through a book.

Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru.³³ Within it the Buddhas in the cardinal directions mimic the esoteric Buddhas in gesture, but not necessarily in colour. Bardzong and Wanla depict the full assembly, while those at Pangdrapuk and Wachen are obviously based on the knowledge of such an assembly. It is this form of the Buddhas that later becomes more or less canonised. In the depictions of such full assemblies, major deviations are the result of colour losses.

Of course, here it would be fitting to survey roughly contemporary descriptions of the maṇḍala assembly to see how the relative consistency within it evolves. Such a study could also clarify the question of the origin of the Medicine Buddha maṇḍala. Unlike the majority of Tibetan Buddhist maṇḍalas, the Medicine Buddha maṇḍala does not appear to have an Indian origin, as I have not found any evidence in this regard.³⁴ The *Collection of All Tantras (rgyud sde kun btus; 1971)*³⁵ refers to the *Sūtra Describing in Full the Specific Previous Vows of the Seven Tathāgatas (Āryasaptatathāgatapūrvapraṇidhānaviśeṣavistārasūtra, 'phags pa de bzhin gshegs pa bdun gyi sngon gyi smon lam gyi chid par rgyas pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo, T 503)*, as the root text for the maṇḍala. However, this text only mentions most of its deities spread throughout the text, but there is no indication that they are meant to make up a maṇḍala. The Medicine Buddha assemblies from Khara Khoto³⁶ reflect this text quite literally by only depicting Brahmā and Indra, as these are the only deities mentioned by name from among the guardians of the directions (*dikpāla*), which are otherwise part of the full maṇḍala.³⁷ I take this as an indication, that the maṇḍala of the Medicine Buddhas must have emerged in a Tibetan context, and its date may not precede the depictions discussed in this essay by very much. The sheer variety of Medicine Buddha maṇḍalas is another indication of such a late derivation.³⁸

The neat picture presented above on the establishment of the iconography of the Medicine

33 As is the case in Bsod nams rgya mtsho and Tachikawa 1989, no. 3.

34 While Tanaka 2018: 19-20, specifically mentions this maṇḍala as being an old maṇḍala and lists its deity assembly, he does not cite an early example. It appears not to be mentioned in Dunhuang texts either, as it can neither be found on among the Old Tibetan Documents Online (<https://otdo.aa-ken.jp/>, accessed December 12, 2019) nor on the website of the International Dunhuang Project (<http://idp.bl.uk/>, accessed December 12, 2019). The maṇḍala is also not described in any of the Tengyur texts I surveyed for this study.

35 See Bsod nams rgya mtsho et al. 1991: 3-4, no. 3.

36 See Pjotrowskij 1993, cat.nos. 7, 8, the former also on HAR n.d., no. 31344.

37 Pjotrowskij 1993, cat.no. 7, also features only ten Bodhisattvas, two of them flanking the Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru. The arrangement of the other eight above two monks as well as Brahmā and Indra makes clear that they are here understood as audience only. This is conformed by Pjotrowskij 1993, cat.nos. 8, where only three Bodhisattvas are depicted together with a monk, Brahmā and Indra.

38 See the Medicine Buddha maṇḍalas collected on HAR n.d.. Other indications are the replacement of the actual sūtra on the medicine Buddhas by Prajñāpāramitā, the addition of the full set of the guardians of the directions (*dikpāla*), and the alignment of the Bodhisattvas mentioned in the text with the respective Buddhas and their number.

Buddhas does not account for the consistency in the depiction of Aśokottamaśrī (Nyangen Méchokpel, mya ngan med mchog dpal) who is always red and associated with Amitābha. This consistency likely has its roots in the very text that is also considered the source of the maṇḍala, the *Sūtra Describing in Full the Specific Previous Vows of the Seven Tathāgatas*. In it, not only the buddha-field of Bhaiṣajyaguru is compared to Sukhāvātī (*bde ba chen*), but also the buddha-field of Aśokottamaśrī. This association obviously has been preserved in the diverse contexts the iconography of the medicine Buddhas was established.

Coming back to the iconographic handbooks mentioned at the outset of this study, they are actually of little help for the iconography of the Medicine Buddhas. For example, the iconography found in the *Rinjung Gyatsa* does not represent their most commonly described or depicted forms, and is thus of little help in identifying them. In fact, the pantheon as it is represented in the Namgyal Sūtra Collection could equally serve as a model for another iconographic handbook, and its idiosyncratic elements would then be seen as representing a norm, as is the case with the groups of 300 or 360 icons represented at the Qing court.³⁹ Obviously, none of them can be taken as representing a norm. Their main relevance lies in the fact that they are accompanied by written identifications, which Namgyal strictly speaking is not. The example of the Medicine Buddhas, thus, also demonstrates the relative importance of iconographic conventions throughout the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

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³⁹ For example, Chandra 1990, pantheon 5, represents the 300 icons.

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