



Tenzing Asian Art LLC  
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## PRESS RELEASE FOR BRAFA 2022

Tenzing Asian Art presents an exhibition on Buddhist art and traditions of Tibet.

Buddhism arose from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha after he attained enlightenment in India in the 5th century B.C. As Buddhism disseminated across Asia, it absorbed new philosophical ideas and adopted local and regional practices, both exotic and esoteric. By the time Buddhism was officially introduced to Tibet in the 7th century, it had become multifaceted, with a growing pantheon, elaborate practices, and multiple forms.

Mahayana Buddhism, the form that was brought to Tibet, advocated the virtue of bodhisattvas, compassionate beings who postpone their own enlightenment in order to assist others. In addition to the Buddha, a pantheon of bodhisattvas became essential parts of Mahayana Buddhist spiritual practice. Ritual enactments offered ways to access these figures to overcome personal obstacles to enlightenment.

As it evolved in Tibet, Mahayana Buddhism encompassed a plethora of teachings, spiritual empowerments, and mantras; elaborate rites and rituals; and a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses. A ritually and visually complex form of Buddhism, it came to be known as Vajrayana: the path or way (*yana*) of the thunderbolt (*vajra*, also meaning diamond). Ritual objects and images were crucial to its esoteric practice. These devotional needs shaped the Tibetan Buddhist artistic renaissance from the 7th to the 15th centuries, except for a short interruption in the 10th century.

This exhibition presents sublime artworks—sculpture, paintings, illuminated manuscript pages, and ritual objects—of this esoteric tradition practiced in Tibet.



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Figure 1.  
Diamond Scepter (Vajra)  
Tibet, Yarlung Dynasty, 7th–9th century  
Iron with traces of gold, 23 cm (9.1 in) long

Provenance:

Josette & Théo Schulmann, acquired 1960–1970  
Cornette de Saint Cyr, Paris, *Arts d'Asie—Collection Schulmann*, 2019

The vajra or diamond scepter is an integral symbol of esoteric Buddhist practice. Associated with the diamond, the vajra symbolizes the transparency and indestructibility of the truth of Buddhist teachings. Its distinguishing characteristics are its three equally proportioned sections: a central shaft and groups of prongs at both ends. Always used with the bell, the vajra is held in the right hand during rituals.

Vajras became prominent in Buddhist rites between the 7th and 9th centuries, the time of the arrival and initial spread of esoteric Buddhism in Tibet. The Indian Buddhist mystic Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) arrived in Tibet in 747. A proponent of tantric rituals, he introduced esoteric Buddhism to Tibet



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and founded Nyingma, the first sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Nine-pronged vajras are specifically associated with the Nyingma tradition.

This iron vajra has eight curved lateral prongs, four on each end, linked by ornate lotus petals to the central shaft. The spherical center, considered the ninth prong, is girded with a beaded border upon which rest faces of wondrous mythical beings. Traces of gold lend a spectacular luster to the iron and emphasize the intricate carvings. The prongs, shaped like stylized flames, emerge from slightly indicated makaras (mythical aquatic creatures) and converge on the outer end to form a diamond top, an allusion to the union of wisdom and compassion.

This is one of thirty rare early Tibetan iron (possibly meteorite iron) vajras existing today. Vajras made of iron found in the Tibetan plateau are also referred to as *namchak dorjee* ("sky metal dorjee") or colloquially as "falling from the sky." A lama in Tibet's illustrious Drepung Monastery commented in a private conversation that iron vajras are carved from blocks of meteorite iron. He explained that after all impurities are removed from the iron, the outline of a vajra is drawn and then carved into it. The vajra's details are produced in stages. When the process is complete, one prong is removed, a replica is made of it, and the spare prong is buried in the earth where the meteorite iron was found. This helps to explain why in vajras of this kind, one prong is often unbolted while the others are fixed.



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Figure 2.  
Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara  
Tibet, 13th century  
Distemper on cloth, 53 x 42 cm (20.9 x 16.5 in)  
Sanskrit and Tibetan inscriptions on reverse  
C14 test range 1169–1260 (95.4%)

Provenance:  
Hong Kong art market, 2014  
Private collection, Zurich, 2015

The thangka or scroll painting is the most distinctive contribution of Tibetan Buddhism to the Buddhist artistic heritage. While similar paintings are found in other Asian Buddhist communities, the thangka form achieved in Tibet from the 11th century onward is unmatched in its stylistic diversity, execution, and scale of production.

In this luminous thangka, Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, is represented in his aspect as Shadakshari, according to the requisite iconography



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of a white body, single head, and four arms. His central hands are joined in a gesture of homage (namaskara mudra), while his upper right hand clasps prayer beads and upper left hand holds a lotus stem. Shadakshari is seated in the vajra position on a lotus cushion atop a modest throne. He is flanked by his two principal attendants and by Buddhas in the upper register. The bottom register depicts a monk performing a ritual accompanied by four protective and tutelary deities, all associated with material wealth and prosperity. Shadakshari has special significance to Tibetans: he embodies the mantra “*Om Ma ni Pad me Hum*” chanted by devout Tibetans.

This thangka is an example of compelling iconographic form, as well as of the artistic influence of eastern Indian traditions that flourished in the monastic establishments of Bihar and Bengal during the Pala Dynasty in the 11th and 12th centuries. The Buddhas in the upper register are directly inspired by Indian manuscripts circulated in Tibet by Indian teachers (*panditas*) during the 11th to late 12th centuries. Pala aesthetics are also reflected in details of the Bodhisattva’s adornments: the large gold hoops bedecking his ovoid halo; his tall chignon; the tiers of triangular panels on his crown; the hoop earrings, necklaces, and arm bands; and the short dhoti covering his hips. The thangka’s reverse contains prayers in Tibetan and Sanskrit written in the shape of a triangle.

The meticulous delineation of luxurious ornaments and the painting’s stunning composition offer an extraordinary window into how the Tibetan visual vocabulary incorporated elements of eastern Indian aesthetics.



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Figure 3.

Initiation Paintings (Tsakalis) of the Eight Precepts of Lama Nyang ral  
Tibet, late 12th–early 13th century  
Pigments on paper, approx. 18 x 18 cm (7 x 7 in) each

Provenance:

Private UK and Swiss collection, since 1980s

These four small paintings are tsakalis, or initiation cards, which were used by itinerant Buddhist teachers to transmit teachings and to evoke Vajrayana Buddhist deities. These tsakalis were used by the illustrious Tibetan Buddhist teacher Nyangrel Nyima Wozer (1124–1192) to transmit the teachings of eight esoteric meditation deities. Each painting is an original and belongs to a larger series, of which 128 have been identified. The entire count of the series remains unknown. This series of tsakalis transmits teachings called the Eight Precepts, represented by eight esoteric meditation deities and the members of their entourages, which include groups of Tibetan deities such as the *Ma mo*, wrathful female deities who are not part of the Indian Buddhist pantheon.





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Each tsakali in this group bears a portrait of a male or female esoteric deity. On the reverse of the card are inscriptions in Tibetan providing the deity's name; his or her divine rank or category; a brief description of his or her physiognomy, distinctive clothing, and principal attributes; and the ritual invocation for that deity.

Tibetan Buddhists believe that Padmasambhava, the 8th-century Buddhist mystic who was essential to the dissemination of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet, concealed teachings to be revealed in later times by select designated individuals. The concealed teachings are called *Terma* (treasures), and the individuals who find them are known as *Tertons* (treasure discoverers). Nyangrel Nyima Wozer is regarded as one of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist *Tertons*, as well as one of the most prolific. Among his notable treasure finds was the first set of *The Eight Instructions*, which continues to guide practitioners. He also compiled the first biography of Padmasambhava. He continued to be revered by later generations, including the fifth Dalai Lama, who had numerous visions of Nyangrel Nyima Wozer imparting teachings to him.

Tsakali cards such as these belonged to an individual teacher (in this case, Nyangrel Nyima Wozer) who would use them for didactic purposes to align a disciple with the deity represented on the card. The ritual involved visualizing the deity as depicted on the tsakali's front and described on its reverse.

Like most of the tsakalis we will be showing, these four were certainly made by an autodidact (believed to be the nephew of Nyangrel Nyima Wozer); they are not painted in the classical manner of any school. Nevertheless, the animated expressions of the figures and the blocks of bold color convey immense power and magic. The creators of these 12th- or 13th-century tsakalis created devotional art that is simultaneously mysterious and familiarly contemporary.