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Tibetan Bardo Painting as Soteriological Site

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Abstract

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This thesis explores Tibetan *bardo* (intermediate state) paintings, particularly a *thangka* (scroll painting) provisionally titled the *Colored Dots Mandala,* as dynamic soteriological sites. The first chapter centers around the iconography and my methodology. I introduce the hundredfold bardo deities as expressions of *rigpa* (naturally-awakened awareness) that manifest in the post-mortem bardo. I then critique conventional art-historical methods that conflate the paintings with source texts, proposing a new approach that aligns with Tibetan Buddhist views, in which art not only represents knowledge but *helps* and transforms practitioners. The second chapter examines six ways bardo paintings help people, divided into two categories: aiding the deceased and assisting the living. For the deceased, these paintings serve as maps through the bardo stages, ritual objects to empower bardo beings, and sacred objects to generate merit. For the living, they create sacred spaces for rituals, help devotees familiarize with death, and support meditation practices.

The next two chapters narrow the focus to a single soteriological program—the *Colored Dots Mandala*—to provide a more in-depth understanding of a bardo painting's soteriological power and the ways it achieves such power. The third chapter explores the background behind the *Colored Dots*' creation. I argue that the work was created in mid-nineteenth-century Tsang amid the non-sectarian (Rime) movement. This painting is part of a meditation program that involves an interaction between the lama, artist, and practitioner. In the fourth chapter, I apply the Tibetan Dzogchen philosophical framework of *ground* (view), *path*, and *result* to explore how the lama, artist, and practitioners collaborate to establish these stages. The two mandalas establish the *ground* of the omnipresence of rigpa, while the idiosyncratic features within them facilitate an individualized spiritual *path.* Through this ground and path, the practitioner eventually identifies with the thangka as a reflection of their own rigpa, culminating in the *result* of Buddhahood.

Overall, through examining seven bardo paintings and focusing on one, this thesis demonstrates that these works do not merely display esoteric knowledge but serve as soteriological sites, preserving the transformative discourses between the lama, artist, and practitioners, leading to merit, empowerment, awakening, and more.

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Tibetan Bardo Painting as Soteriological Site

Yijin Li

Foreword

I would like to use this space to acknowledge the sacredness, secrecy, and seriousness of the works explored in this thesis. Many of the texts, scroll paintings, and murals I discuss were traditionally kept hidden, accessible only to initiated lineage holders. As embodiments of profound spiritual power, these objects were not meant—nor dared—to be seen, read, or practiced by those who had not undergone proper preparation and received the necessary empowerments. Without such grounding, it was believed that exposure could have detrimental effects due to the limitations of one's spiritual capacity. In the contemporary world, however, these materials have become increasingly public as Tibetan Buddhism has spread to the West. Many of the texts are now available in English translation, and artworks once kept within monastic or ritual contexts are exhibited in museums such as the Rubin Museum of Art and cataloged on platforms like the Himalayan Art Resources (HAR) website.

I have not received initiation into the specific liturgies connected to these works. From a traditional standpoint, this would mean I am not qualified to see, let alone interpret, these materials. Therefore, the inquiries presented in this thesis are, in essence, a contemporary engagement—a reinterpretation of esoteric wisdoms that were historically inaccessible to the public. I also acknowledge the limitations of this research, which touches upon a vast topic with tremendous scope for further discussion and inquiry.

Introduction

A Buddhist practitioner receives a sacred gift—a thangka, or Tibetan scroll painting, imbued with the presence of deities believed to guide their spiritual advancement (Fig. 1). As the silk scroll unfurls, its painted surface catching the light, the world of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* gradually reveals itself.[1] The dark blue sky at the top fades into light blue and then turns green, transitioning in the lower half into a landscape featuring fruit trees, pine trees, lakes, and hills. Green, yellow, pink, and white clouds are floating all over the space, upon which sit buddhas, teachers, and deities, each on their lotus or teaching thrones. Upon the idealized landscape reside two enormous maṇḍalas (*dyil-'khor*, deities' abodes) of identical size, spanning the entire vertical space and four-fifths of the horizontal space, framed by the six teachers and deities on the leftmost and rightmost columns.

The maṇḍalas house countless esoteric deities, distinguished from each other by their color, body shape, posture, face, garments, and ritual instruments. Divided into two groups, the wrathful deities in the upper maṇḍala arise from a circle of burning fire, whereas the peaceful deities in the lower maṇḍala float on top of a serene blue space, with many colored dots scattered between them. The wrathful deities have multiple heads, arms, legs, and eyes, sometimes with animal features; wear five skull crowns, tiger-skin loincloths, and human-skin cloaks; and brandish weapons, arrows, swords, skull bowls, or human corpses. In contrast, the peaceful deities mostly have human forms; wear five-jewel buddha-crowns, necklaces, earrings, and heavenly garments; and rest in meditative or graceful postures.

As the practitioner gazes upon the hanging scroll, they are drawn into an extraterrestrial realm where the landscape, maṇḍalas, and divine beings seamlessly converge. The stark contrast between the maṇḍalas' burning red fire and serene blue space, as well as between the peaceful and wrathful deities, heightens their experience, compelling them to remain immersed in this curious and fascinating world. This is an encounter with a surreal site—a sacred vision beyond the confines of mundane experience.

[1] The works of art discussed in this thesis are provisionally titled based on their central subject matter or distinctive iconographic features depicted on the front side of the thangka.

The *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* is a meditational thangka probably made in the mid-nineteenth century Tsang province (western-central Tibet). The subject matter belongs to the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism: one hundred and two *zhi-khro* (peaceful-and-wrathful) deities that manifest during the *bardo*—the transitional state between death and rebirth, according to the Tibetan belief. This painting was made by a Nyingma lama holding the lineage of bardo teachings, in collaboration with an artist trained in rendering such complex visionary content. It functioned as a meditative aid for an initiated nineteenth-century Nyingma practitioner, supporting their spiritual progression toward Buddhahood.

This thesis investigates the soteriological programs embedded in seven bardo paintings from the Himalayan Art Resources (HAR) collection, with a particular focus on the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from Art History and Religious Studies to analyze the iconography, functions, and ritual experience. Methodologically, it combines formal analysis with the examination of ethnographic, art-historical, and textual sources. The goal of this thesis is to show how bardo paintings are not only representations of deities but also *soteriological sites*—spaces of discursive interactions among the lamas, artists, and practitioners which culminates in the practitioners' transformation. I argue that bardo paintings, despite sharing almost the identical subject matter, do not represent a fixed set of esoteric knowledge outlined in the textual sources. Rather, their meanings necessarily diverge from their liturgical origins and are reshaped by the specific contexts in which they are produced and engaged. The *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*, in particular, is not only an object but also an *event, a phenomenon*, and a *program* for spiritual growth. The program is designed through the lama and the artist's nuanced understanding of the meditator's unique spiritual dispositions and realized through the meditator's identification of the thangka as a mirror of their body and mind.

Chapter 1 introduces the iconography of the bardo deities alongside a brief historical overview of the development of bardo paintings, centered on the Tibetan Buddhist concept of bardo and *zhi-khro*. I articulate that the hundred-fold peaceful and wrathful deities, associated with the Karling-Dzogchen teachings, embody the latent *rigpa*, or buddha-nature, within one's subtle body that manifests in the afterlife. In addition, I critique the limitations of conventional iconographic analysis, particularly its

tendency to conflate paintings with their associated textual sources. As an alternative, I propose a method more aligned with the Tibetan Buddhist epistemology—one that recognizes art not merely as representation of esoteric knowledge but as an active force that *helps* and transforms individuals. This methodological reorientation sets the foundation for the two central questions explored in the following chapters: *What kinds of help do the paintings provide?* And *how are these soteriological programs actualized*?

Chapter 2 addresses the first question: *What kinds of help do the paintings provide?* I argue that bardo paintings serve at least six distinct soteriological functions, which can be grouped into two categories: those aiding the deceased and those aiding the living. For the deceased, the paintings serve as maps to lead their way throughout the bardo stages (e.g., the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes*), ritual objects purifying the bardo beings (e.g., the Karling initiation cards), and merit-generating sacred objects (e.g., the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala*). For the living, they serve as sacred presences creating communal ritual space (e.g., thangkas in the Rebkong festival), diagrams preparing devotees for death (e.g., the Ladakh mural), and meditation supports for maṇḍala visualization (e.g., the *Jayson Nyingpo and Bardo Maṇḍalas* and Lukhang mural).

Chapters 3 and 4 narrow the focus to a single painting—the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*—to explore in depth the second guiding question of the thesis: *how are these soteriological programs actualized?* Chapter 3 examines the historical and religious context, examining its provenance, date, associated religious movement, function, and the key figures involved in its production and use. I argue that the painting was made in mid-nineteenth-century Tsang Province during the Rimé (non-sectarian) movement. It served as a meditation program for an initiated Nyingma practitioner, made possible through the collaboration of three agents: the lama, artist, and practitioner. Chapter 4 builds on this contextual foundation by analyzing how these three participants actualized the soteriological program through a Nyingma Dzogchen analytical framework, which unfolds in three stages: ground, path, and result. Through the depiction of the *uncontrived* colored ground (replacing architectural palaces), the lama and the artist establish the *ground* (view), featuring rigpa's innate presence in the practitioners' body. Then,

by incorporating idiosyncratic iconographic features—including the uncommon forms of Mahottara Heruka, Samantabhadra/Samantabhadrī, and the six sages, as well as the addition of the colored dots—the lama and the artist construct the practitioner's *path* to recognize the innate rigpa. These elements establish an individualized spiritual trajectory tailored to the practitioner's capacities and aspirations, as interpreted by the lama and the artist. Finally, the practitioner attains the *result* by recognizing the thangka not as a separate *other* but an undifferentiated mirror of their own body and mind. This realization completes the soteriological program, as the practitioner fully identifies with rigpa and attains Buddhahood.

Chapter 1. The Iconography of Bardo Deities and its Problems

The Bardo and *Zhi-khro* in the Karling Liturgy

An overview of the Tibetan concept of bardo and *zhi-khro* is indispensable for us to understand the depicted deities in the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*. These esoteric deities—sixty wrathful deities and forty-two peaceful deities—are *related to* the *zhi-khro* (peaceful-and-wrathful-one) maṇḍala from a series of fourteenth-century terma (*gter-ma*, revealed treasure) texts discovered by the famed tertön (*gter-ston*, treasure-revealer) Karma Lingpa (b. 1327-1387) and known as the Karling Treasure Tradition. Within this collection, the *zhi-khro* deities feature especially in the teaching known as *The Natural Liberation through Recognition of Enlightened Intention* (*Zab-chos zhi-khro dgongs-pa rang-grol*), which also circulates in a reduced yet more widely known edition, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* or *Bardo Thodol* (*Bar-do Thos-grol*).[2] The teachings in the Karling Treasure Tradition are believed to have originally been taught by the eighth-century great tantric master Padmasambhava, the Lotus Guru, and concealed in unusual and remote locations for future rediscoveries. These same teachings were then later excavated by the prophesied fourteenth-century tertön Karma Lingpa from the southeastern region of Dakpo at Mount Gampodar.[3] The various esoteric teachings of the Karling Treasure tradition were then passed among separate teaching-lineages and maintained alongside other similar systems at different monasteries until the standardization at the end of the seventeenth century by a controversial tantrika from eastern Tibet named Rikzin Nyima Drakpa.[4]

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[2] The text I reference is the English edition titled *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation*, a translation provided by Gyurme Dorje based on the 1960s three-volume manuscript edition of *The Natural Liberation through Recognition of Enlightened Intention* (*Zap-chos zhi-khro dgongs-pa rang-grol*) from the library of the late Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche. I used *The Natural Liberation through Recognition of Enlightened Intention* as my reference text because it is the most comprehensive collection of Karling tradition that includes fourteen different texts on theories, instructions for purification, confession, and consciousness transference, prayers, mantras, and even a masked drama. In comparison, given their popular usage, it is often unclear to which specific text *Bardo Thodol* or *The Tibetan Book of The Dead* refers. More information about the translation can be found in Gyurme Dorje, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation* (New York: Viking, 2006), xliv.

[3] Bryan J. Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14.

[4] Cuevas, 5, 21, 180. The tertön Rikzin Nyima Drakpa was widely revered as a miracle-worker for much of his life, serving as a teacher to both Desi Sangye Gyatso (1653–1705) and the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1706). However, in his later years, he became a target of considerable resentment and suspicion among some contemporaries, who

The literature by Karma Lingpa, whose name is popularly abbreviated as Karling, essentially teaches Buddhist philosophy and ritual practices regarding death and bardo—the intermediate state between death and rebirth. The term bardo (literally "the in-between") is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit *antarābhava*, meaning the intermediate period between two states of being. The idea that there is an in-between state between death and rebirth is a long-held Buddhist belief originating in India in the Abhidharma literature. The great scholar Vasubandhu (4th-5th century CE), in his monumental *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (*Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*), codified the theories of the intermediate state, naming four stages in the life-cycle of a sentient being: 1) birth, 2) the period from birth to the moment of dying, 3) death, and 4) the period between death and next birth.[5] This system became the standard presentation of bardo adopted by Tibetans from the earliest phase of the spread of Buddhism in Tibet (8th century CE)—although the exact number of bardos differs according to each school or lineage. From the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, bardos differentiate from each other by different modalities of subtle energy or "wind" (*rlung*; Sanskrit: *prāṇa*). His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama provides a clear introduction to the bardo between death and rebirth:

> The point at which the gross levels of energy are completely dissolved and only the subtle energies remain is death. The stage at which these energies unfold into a more manifest form is the intermediate state, and the stage at which they eventually manifest substantially is called rebirth.[6]

A bardo-being transforms his subtle energies carried from the last incarnation into a subtle body, which will eventually manifest into a physical body in the future incarnation. Since in this special form of existence consciousness is not connected to a gross physical body, this post-mortem journey is often considered terrifying, painful, and confused, characterized by dream-like hallucinations and karmic obstacles resulting from past actions.

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alleged that he had used his extraordinary powers of "black magic" to cause the untimely death of the Tenth Karmapa, Chöying Dorje (1605–1674).

[5] Cuevas, 39-41.

[6] His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, "Introductory Commentary," in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation*, Gyurme Dorje (New York: Viking, 2006), xxi.

All the major sects of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Sarma (New Translation) schools (Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug) and Nyingma (Old Translation) school believe that this terrifying journey of post-mortem bardo carries abundant soteriological opportunities, which, if skillfully utilized, may lead to Buddhahood before the next incarnation. In the Sarma schools, the threefold system of death, bardo, and rebirth corresponds to the three bodies of a buddha: dharmakāya (ultimate body), sambhogakāya (illusory or enjoyment body), and nirmāṇakāya (emanation body). His Holiness explains:

> Death is the point at which both the physical and mental fields dissolve into inner radiance and where both consciousness and energy exist at their most subtle non-dual level, as in deep sleep. This mode in its fruitional state is the buddha-body of Reality (dharmakāya). Then, from within this essential or natural state, one enters into the intermediate state where, although there is perceptual experience, the phenomenal forms are comparatively subtle and non-substantive, as in a dream. This mode in its fruitional state is the buddha-body of Perfect Resource (sambhogakāya). Then, from this state, one assumes a grosser physical existence culminating in actual rebirth, as in our normal waking experience. This mode in its fruitional state is the buddha-body of Emanation (nirmāṇakāya).[7]

This threefold correspondence between bardo states and buddha bodies provides the basis for the co-called generation-phase (*bskyed rim*) and perfection-phase practice (*rdzogs rim*) of Supreme Yoga Tantra (annuttarayoga-tantra), the highest teaching of the Sarma schools. A practitioner overcomes the ordinary death, bardo, and rebirth, transforming the three mundane bodies of those states to the awakened buddha bodies of dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya, thereby attaining the complete trikāya (three-bodies) of Buddhahood.[8]

The Nyingma (Old Translation) school shares the focus on the soteriological aspect of bardos with the Sarma schools, but it proposes a completely different ontology and corresponding set of practices. The teachings of the Dzogchen Nyingtik (*rdzogs-chen snying-tig*) or "Great Perfection Heart Essence," which are among the highest teachings of the Nyingma school, further divide the post-mortem bardo into three different states: the bardo of dying (*'chi-kha'i bar-do*), the bardo of reality (*chos-nyid bar-do*), and the bardo of becoming (*srid-pa'i bar-do*).[9] According to Dzogchen philosophy, all

[7] His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, "Introductory Commentary," xxii.
[8] Cuevas, 44-45.
[9] Cuevas, 63.

experiences are pervaded by *rigpa* (*rig-pa*), the primordial ground of emptiness, characterized as the openness of pure potentiality combined with the luminosity or clarity of awareness. Learning to recognize and identify with this primordial essence leads to Buddhahood.[10] Indeed, one might say that rigpa itself is one's innate Buddhahood since it is always with that person. Rigpa naturally manifests as clear light (*od-gsal*) at the end of the bardo of dying, when all the coarse physio-psychological components of the person dissolve back into the ground's original radiance. If the clear light is not recognized by the bardo-being as rigpa, the clear light turns into a maṇḍala of peaceful and wrathful deities during the bardo of reality, when the physio-psychological components emerge from the ground in their most elemental forms. If the bardo-being still does not identify the manifestations of this maṇḍala and these deities as rigpa, the being travels to the next bardo phase, the bardo of becoming, when the psycho-physical element components regain their coarse forms.[11] Like the Sarma schools, the death and rebirth process provide a powerful opportunity for awakening. But while practitioners of Supreme Yoga Tantra use the post-mortem bardo as a reference to gain a particular buddha-body, practitioners of Dzogchen directly engage with the bardo to bring forth the naturally-awakened rigpa underlying the bardo (and all other) experiences.

According to Bryan J. Cuevas and David Germano, two scholars of the Nyingma tradition, the Karling liturgy shares a similar framework with the Nyingma school's Dzogchen Nyingtik literature. Germano argues that the Karling literature is "in large part a systematization of Seminal Heart [Dzogchen Nyingtik] teachings."[12] Cuevas claims that the Karling liturgy is a combination of "the cosmogony models of the Dzogchen Nyingtik system" and "a maṇḍala of one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities borrowed from the Mahāyoga tantras," resulting in a complete liturgical system with a particular focus on death and the bardo.[13] Both Karling and Dzogchen Nyingtik literature emphasize an experience of clear

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[10] His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, "Introductory Commentary," xxv.
[11] Cuevas, 61-67.
[12] David Germano, "Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)," *Journal of the International Association for Buddhist Studies* 17.2 (1994): 290.
[13] Cuevas, 59, 67. In the Nyingma tradition, the highest class of teaching, Supreme Yoga Tantra (Anuttarayoga-tantra), is divided into three subdivisions: Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga (Dzogchen). These teachings differ from the lower tantras by maintaining a non-dual approach, which involves transcending the duality of accepting

light, which later emanates into a maṇḍala of peaceful and wrathful deities, during the bardo. And both emphasize that this clear light and this maṇḍala are opportunities for awakening through recognizing them as manifestations of one's innate Buddhahood. The difference is that the Karling teachings have a heightened focus on the maṇḍala of peaceful and wrathful deities. The Karling maṇḍala is derived from *Guhyagarbhatantra* (*The Tantra of Secret Essence*), the oldest and principal text of the Nyingma school, introduced to Tibet from the eighth to tenth centuries.[14] It represents a Mahāyoga interpretation of the five buddha families—the standard set in all tantric Buddhism systems—where the five tathāgatas, as embodiments of fivefold primordial wisdom, are expanded into a hundred deities each embodying a particular branch of primordial wisdom.[15] By appropriating the *Guhyagarbhatantra* maṇḍala and combining it with the Dzogchen threefold bardo divisions, the Karling liturgy creates a complete philosophical, liturgical, and practice-oriented program with a particular focus on death and the bardo.

Clarifications on the Source Text

Many scholars insist on locating the source text as an indispensable step to interpret the iconography of depicted deities, but this might be impossible in the case of the *Colored Dots.* Although it is true that the Karling liturgy is essential to understand the iconography of the bardo *zhi-khro*, I am not suggesting that the creators of the *Colored Dots* necessarily used one of the Karling texts as a reference when making the thangka. Rather, I am merely pointing out the connection between the painting and texts, using the Karling theoretical framework as a starting point for inquiry.

My reservations arise for two reasons. First, in the *Colored Dots*, although the number of deities, their spatial locations in the maṇḍala, and the hierarchical relationship among them corresponds almost

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positive attributes and rejecting negative ones in the relative reality. Among the three subdivisions, Mahāyoga, the lowest of the three, comprises a "ground of discriminative awareness," a path of maṇḍala contemplation in both the generation and perfection phases, and a result of "the status of an awareness holder (*rig-'dzin*)." In contrast, Atiyoga, or Dzogchen, focuses on a ground of rigpa and renounces all "intellectually contrived" paths. For further information on the differences between Mahayana and Atiyoga, see Dudjom Rinpoche, *Jigdrel Yeshe Dorje: The Nying-ma School of Tibetan Buddhism—Its Fundamentals and History*, trans. and ed. Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 295-318.

[14] Gyurme Dorje, "Guhyagarbhatantra and its XIVth Century Commentary" (PhD diss., University of London, 1987), 14.

[15] Cuevas, 64.

perfectly to the Karling maṇḍala, the lineage figures framing the maṇḍalas do not include Karma Lingpa. This implies the depicted teaching is probably not from the Karling lineage. This is why I claim that the esoteric deities are *related to*—not *based on*—the Karling *zhi-khro*.

Second, Karling is not the only Tibetan literature that includes the hundred-deity maṇḍala. There are a wide range of texts invoking the identical maṇḍala of *zhi-khro* deities, including the eighth-to-tenth-century Mahāyoga text *Guhyagarbhatantra* and later Nyingma treasure traditions of Yarjé Orgyan Lingpa (Yar-rje O-rgyan gLing-pa; 1323-c. 1360), Jatsön Nyingpo (Ja'-tshon sNying-po; 1585-1656), Dudul Dorje (bDud-'dul rDo-rje; 1615-1672), Chogyur Lingpa (mChog-'gyur gLing-pa; 1829-1870), and more—which creatively recontextualized the *zhi-khro* maṇḍala from the Mahāyoga context.[16] It is really difficult to determine which particular source text the *Colored Dots* may represent. For example, art historian Jeff Watt asks a series of questions regarding the bardo paintings' source:

> When looking at Nyingma paintings of the peaceful and wrathful deities grouped in clusters of forty-two and fifty-eight it is very difficult to know what the intended specific subject is meant to be. Are all peaceful & wrathful deity paintings intended to be representations of the Guhyagarbha Maṇḍala based on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*? Are some of the paintings intended to depict the system of Karma Lingpa and the *Bardo Todal* and if so then how can one tell the difference? Do some of the paintings also represent the half dozen or more other versions of the *Bardo Todal* based on the revelations of later Nyingma teachers such as Chogyur Lingpa in the 19th century?[17]

There is really no way to "tell the difference" since these different Nyingma literatures all share the same maṇḍala set of deities. The only way to determine the source text is in cases where the lineage master is depicted and identified by distinctive iconography or inscriptions—but this evidence is absent in the case of the *Colored Dots*. However, instead of asking these unsolvable questions, we could go another direction. *Why do we have to determine the source text behind a bardo painting?* Since all these texts share the same maṇḍala, similar iconography of deities, and a common philosophical basis rooted in Nyingma inner tantras (whether Mahāyoga or Dzogchen), why not use the Karling liturgy—the most widely practiced and studied liturgy among the group—as a starting point for inquiry? I will elaborate on

[16] Gyurme Dorje, "Guhyagarbhatantra and its XIVth Century Commentary," 111-114.
[17] "Subject: Bardo (Peaceful & Wrathful) Main Page," Himalayan Art Resources, last modified January 2022, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=227.

this methodological concern later, but for now, in keeping with this approach, my goal is not to pinpoint the source text but to offer an initial examination of the iconography with the assistance of a few texts from the Karling liturgy.

The Iconography of the Bardo Deities

The esoteric deities in the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* are manifestations of the natural state of one's mind-body, that is to say, buddha-nature, perceived during the bardo stage between death and rebirth—a state of suspended reality in which the deceased is presented with opportunities to recognize the true nature of reality.[18] Among the assembly of peaceful and wrathful deities, the wrathful ones in the top maṇḍala are led by a pair of herukas, or blood-drinking deities, depicted in the left of the centermost circle: Mahottara Heruka in sexual embrace with Krodheśvarī. This sexual union is also called *yab-yum*: the father-mother posture. The peaceful deities in the bottom are led by a pair of buddhas depicted in the lefthand side of the centermost circle: Samantabhadra in *yab-yum* with Samantabhadrī. The complete list of deities may be found in the diagram—according to the two most important Karling texts *The Spiritual Practice entitled Natural Liberation of Habitual Tendencies* (*Chos-spyod bag-chags rang-grol*, later abbreviated as *Habitual Tendencies*) and *The Great Liberation by Hearing* (*Thos-grol chen-mo*,later abbreviated as *Hearing*) (Fig. 2). This verse in the Karling text *Root Verses of the Six Intermediate States* (*Bar-do rnam-drug-gi rtsa-tshig*) summarizes the nature of these deities.

> Alas, now as the intermediate state of reality arises before me,
> Renouncing the merest sense of awe, terror or fear,
> I must recognize all that arises to be awareness, manifesting naturally of itself.
> Knowing [such sounds, lights, and rays] to be visionary phenomena of the intermediate state,
> At this moment, having reached this critical point,
> I must not fear the assembly of Peaceful and Wrathful Deities, which manifest naturally![19]

Accordingly, these deities appear in the bardo of reality (*chos-nyid bar-do*), the second post-mortem bardo stage, after the complete dissolution of the deceased's *previous* mind-body in the bardo of dying (*'chi-kha'i bar-do*) and before the arising of the apparitional *reincarnated* mind-body in the bardo of

[18] Gyurme Dorje, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation*, 33–34.
[19] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 33.

becoming (*srid-pa'i bar-do*). They embody the deceased's *reincarnating* mind-body at its most elemental primordial state: the "awareness [rigpa], manifesting naturally as itself" in sambhogakāya forms of deities.[20] For example, Mahottara Heruka embodies the "natural transformation of fundamental ignorance into pure awareness," and his consort Krodheśvarī embodies the "natural transformation of mental constructs associated with the sensory spectrum of phenomena." Samantabhadra embodies the "natural purity of mental consciousness, free from mental ignorance," and his consort Samantabhadrī embodies the "natural purity of the sensory spectrum of phenomena."[21] Together, the one-hundred-and-two deities embody the one-hundred-and-two different aspects of primordial wisdom including the purified five aggregates, five elements, eight consciousnesses, and eight objects of consciousness, among others.

Although these one-hundred-fold manifestations of buddha-nature are always latent in one's experiences—present within the energy centers of the body during one's lifetime—they are directly perceived (by every sentient being) only in the bardo of reality.[22] For a bardo-being, recognizing the appearing deities as manifestations of one's naturally-awakened mind-body (rigpa) leads to Buddhahood—liberation from samsara—whereas failing to do so results in continuous travel in the next bardo stage, and most possibly, continued suffering in samsara.[23] In this case, one's former practice is essential: for a practitioner who is in tune with their essential buddha-nature—for example, through the *sādhanā* (tantric "rites of attainment") of peaceful and wrathful deities, or other meditative practices (such as Dzogchen practices) during their lifetime—it is very possible that they will recognize the deities in the encounter and reach Buddhahood.[24] For a non-practitioner driven by karmic tendencies obtained during the lifetime, it is more likely that they will be totally overwhelmed by terror, "faint from sheer fright," especially in the encounter with the fearful blood-drinking deities, and that they will therefore continue

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[20] Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, *The Bardo Guidebook*, trans. Erik Pema Kunsang, ed. Marcia Schmidt (New Delhi: Rupa, 2003), 119-120.
[21] I will not list the iconography of every deity here due to space constraint. One finds the complete list of correspondence between each bardo deity's name and the wisdom they embody in Gyurme Dorje, "Appendix Two: Symbolism of the maṇḍala of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities," in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 387-402.
[22] Tenga Rinpoche, *Transition and Liberation: Explanations of Meditation in the Bardo*, ed. Susanne Schefczyk, trans., Alex Wilding (Germany: Khampa-Buchverlag, 1996), 54.
[23] Cuevas, 27.
[24] Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, 138.

their journey in the following bardo of becoming.[25] Thus, the peaceful and wrathful deities become the manifestation of one's buddha nature only through an awakened lens of encountering: otherwise, they are merely a source of terror.

A Brief History of Bardo Images

The subject matter, the assembly of bardo deities, is far from unique to the *Colored Dots*. In the collection of the Himalayan Art Resources (HAR), a digital museum directed by Jeff Watt that exhibits over one hundred thousand works of art of Himalayan provenance, there are many bardo-*zhi-khro*-theme objects in the history of Tibetan art—especially the period after the seventeenth century.[26] In the collection, the earliest objects depicting bardo themes are a fifteenth-century manuscript (Fig. 4) and initiation cards (*tsak-li* and *tsa-ka'-li*) (Fig. 5). The manuscript has eighteen pages, while some of the pages might be missing. One side is illuminated with depictions of groups of bardo deities and experiences (such as five colored circles, similar to the ones in the *Colored Dots*), and the other side of the page is text. The set of initiation cards includes thirty cards, probably with many cards missing. It includes twenty-five cards depicting various peaceful and wrathful deities and five cards depicting lineage teachers, each with consecration letters "OṂ ĀH HŪṂ" inscribed on the back. Interestingly, the cards depicting lineage teachers include a portrait of Karma Lingpa (which proves that they must have been used in Karling rituals)—a rare portrait of the famous treasure-revealer that appears only twice in the entire HAR collection. One appearance is from this set, and the other is from an eighteenth-century bardo thangka, in which Karma Lingpa (identified by the inscription) is on top of the clouds at the top center, sitting on the left side and holding a gold treasure casket in the left hand (Fig. 6).

Except for these two interesting objects, there are no early thangkas of bardo themes. And indeed the proliferation of bardo-*zhi-khro* paintings did not take place until about three hundred years later, during the eighteenth century—a period witnessing Rikzin Nyima Drakpa's standardization of the Karling

[25] Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, 119.
[26] "HAR History," Himalayan Art Resources, last modified September 2020, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1759

text and popularization of xylograph (woodblock print technology).[27] In the HAR collection alone, there are over thirty bardo paintings made after the eighteenth century with diverse subjects and compositions. Some depict the peaceful group alone (Fig. 7), others depict the wrathful group alone (Fig. 6), while still others include both groups in the same composition (Fig. 1). In the latter category, some depict 102 bardo deities (Fig. 1); others include 112 deities with an additional maṇḍala of awareness holders (vidyādharas) (Fig. 8); others include 117 deities with an additional set of Jnanadakinis (Fig. 14); while still others include 119 deities with the additional Vajrakila-Heruka pair (Fig. 11a). Furthermore, there are two-maṇḍala compositions (Fig. 1), three-maṇḍala compositions (Fig. 8), four-maṇḍala compositions (Fig. 14), and five-maṇḍala compositions (Fig. 11a). The most dominant composition, however, is the five-maṇḍala composition shown in the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala* (Fig. 11a, 12a, b, c, d).

Ten bardo thangkas from the HAR collection share this five-maṇḍala composition featuring one large wrathful maṇḍala at the center—with an inner circle and two rings—and four peaceful ones at the corners. Among these ten paintings, there is one from Bhutan, dated to the nineteenth-century, which shares an almost identical look, down to every detail, with the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala*, except for the absence of patron deities on top (Fig. 12a). It is very possible that there is a religious and artistic trend in which the composition of the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala* became standardized in the eighteenth century—printed on the xylograph, studied by artists working and traveling around Tibet, and passed down to the disciple artists. Besides the proliferation of scroll paintings, there are also many post-seventeenth-century murals related to bardo themes, including the Lhasa Lukhang murals, commissioned in the eighteenth century (Fig. 10), and the Ladakh Chenrezig Lhakhang mural, commissioned in the nineteenth century (Fig. 11). Therefore, corresponding to the circulation of the treasure literatures (including Karling and others) around the monastery archives throughout Tibet and even Bhutan since the eighteenth century,

[27] Cuevas, 5, 21.

paintings also proliferated for various purposes such as providing instructions, facilitating rituals, acting as meditation support, etc.—a topic central to the next two chapters.[28]

Literature Review

In-depth art-historical writings on bardo paintings are rare, if they exist at all. Bardo literature, with the more well-known name *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, has received tremendous scholarly attention from both Tibetologists and contemporary Tibetan teachers, ever since its first publication in English in 1927—making it undoubtedly the most studied Tibetan literature.[29] However, this fervor has not to date applied to the bardo artworks. Most of the relevant writings on the bardo artwork comes from museum and private collection catalogues, including *Catalogue of The Newark Museum Tibetan Collection* (1986), *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet* (1991), *Tibetan Sacred Art: The Heritage of Tantra* (1995), *Maṇḍala: The Architecture of Enlightenment* (1998), *Tibetan Painting: The Jucker Collection* (2001). They all include one or more images of bardo thangkas paired with a one-page description.[30] All those descriptions contain some or all of the following information: 1) naming the source text and introducing deities as visions in the bardo, 2) describing and identifying the deities, and 3) proposing the chronology, provenance, and painting traditions. The only article-length article on bardo paintings is Kristin Blancke's "Lamayuru (Ladakh)—Chenrezik Lhakhang: The *Bar Do Thos Grol* Illustrated as A Mural Painting," in which she identifies each scene based on the Karling text *Hearing*, makes a brief argument on the audience for the mural, and attaches translations of most of the inscriptions.[31]

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[28] Cuevas, 24; Kristin Blancke, "Lamayuru (Ladakh)—Chenrezik Lhakhang: The *Bar Do Thos Grol* Illustrated as a Mural Painting, " in *Art and Architecture in Ladakh*, ed. Erberto Lo Bue and John Bray, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 277.
[29] Cuevas, 5-14.
[30] Valrae Reynolds, Amy Heller, and Janet Gyatso, *Catalogue of The Newark Museum Tibetan Collection* (New Jersey: Newark, 1986), 177; Marylin Rhine and Robert Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, and Tibet House, 1991), 198; Detlef Ingo Lauf, *Tibetan Sacred Art: The Heritage of Tantra* (Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1995), 152; Denise Patry Leidy and Robert A. F. Thurman, *Maṇḍala: The Architecture of Enlightenment* (New York, Boston: Asia Society Galleries, Tibet House, Shambhala, 1997), 104*;* Hugo E. Kreijger, *Tibetan Painting: the Jucker Collection* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 132.
[31] Kristin Blancke, 274-297.

Problems with the catalogues include 1) the attribution of the source text to the Karling liturgy (or other lineages) is without evidence; 2) the nature of the deities is not sufficiently explained or sometimes even wrong—for example, the art consultant Hugo E. Kreijger incorrectly attributes wrathful deities to "negative elements of the deceased's mind," whereas in reality, they are not "negative" but, on the contrary, awakened; 3) the reasons behind attribution of a painting to a particular time and region are extremely general and vague.[32] While Blancke's article—much more rigorous in length and depth—does briefly identify the audience, it fails to describe the audience's *experience* encountering the work, a lack that this thesis tries to address. The most serious problem shared by these writings, however, is that their interpretative method involves nothing more than identifying the source text and then describing the image based on this text. In doing so, their method necessarily conflates text and art, confuses the artistic tradition with the textual tradition, and eventually reduces the paintings to a secondary role as illustrations or visual "translations" of a primary text. Their goal, therefore, appears not to be to understand the paintings—including the socio-historical context, religious function, agency of the makers, audiences' experiences, and so on—but merely to find a textual solution behind the esoteric scene and call it a day.

This interpretative method that replaces image with text has a long history in Tibetan art history research. In his magnum opus *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* published in 1949, one of the earliest academic writings on Tibetan art, the renowned Indologist and Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci addresses two bardo thangkas, one depicting the peaceful bardo deities and the other depicting the wrathful bardo deities. Tucci's treatment includes an introduction to the Karling teachings, a history of the bardo concept, and a detailed visual description of two pieces based on the ritual text. Here is an extract of Tucci's analysis of the *Vajrasattva and Peaceful Bardo Deities* (Fig. 7):

> On the four corners of the corresponding picture, or on the four doors of the maṇḍala, four terrific deities, coupled; they are, beginning from the upper left-hand corner and proceeding towards the right, *bdud rtsi dkyil ba* (but in the tanka *'byi gram*?) with Dril bzin (=*ạd-sin*) ma, "she who hold a bell," *rTa mgrin* with *lCags grogs* "she who bears a chain," *gŠin rje gsed* with *Žag pa ma*, "she who holds the lash," *rNam ma rgyal* with *lCags kyu*, "she who carries a hook"; below, in the

[32] Hugo E. Kreijger, *Tibetan Painting: The Jucker Collection* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 132. Kreijger claims that "they [wrathful deities] represent the negative elements in the deceased's mind; if he can face them without fear, his enlightenment is eminent."

> center, Ekajaṭā; to the left *aḌod k'ams* [*dban p'yug ma*]; …, *Dam can rdo rje legs*, to the right: *Rāhu* and *San dmar gnod sbyin*. On each side of *Kun tu bzaṅ po*, *Śrīsiṃha* and *dGa' rab rdo rje*. Thus is completed the maṇḍala of the 42 deities who are precisely those described in the *Bar do t'os grol*.[33]

In the above passage, typical of the entire volume, Tucci's goal is to identify each of the forty-two deities depicted in the thangka based on the corresponding ritual text. In another part of his work, he addresses the symbolism of these deities in addition to their names. While Tucci's analysis is comprehensive, it is limited by the failure to address the discrepancies between the text and the image. For example, even though he acknowledges that in the upper-left corner of the painting, the place of the gatekeeper Dütsi Kyilwa (Bdud rtsi dkyil ba, Amṛtakuṇḍalin) is replaced by a portrayal of 'Byi gram, he puts his question in the parentheses without addressing the unusual appearance of an out-of-place deity. Furthermore, Tucci prioritizes the ritual text over visual forms. Instead of identifying the depicted deity as 'Byi gram, he replaces it with the deity that is *supposed to* be depicted here in the ritual text. The outcome of his method is that Tucci is not analyzing the painting but merely pairing the painting with a text and then summarizing and prioritizing the text.

Recent scholarship problematizes this conflation of text and image, evident in many works on exoteric Buddhist art and less on the esoteric art of Tibet—since ritual texts are indeed the foremost and irreplaceable source to understand esoteric subject matters. One successful attempt may be represented by the collection *Embodying Wisdom: Art, Text and Interpretation in the History of Esoteric Buddhism* edited by Rob Linrothe and Henrik H. Sorensen. Linrothe warns that the habit of expecting textual solutions "blinds" one to the images before one's eyes and calls for a practice that departs from privileging an unknown text as "the precious key to unlocking the identifications."[34] In the article "Group Portrait: Mahāsiddhas in the Alchi Sumtsek," Linrothe questions the necessity of reconstructing every

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[33] Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, trans., Virginia Vacca (Rome: Libreria Dello Stato, 1949), 2:550. Note that Tucci uses a different transliteration system from that adopted in this paper.

[34] Rob Linrothe, "Introduction: Border Crossings," v; Rob Linrothe, "Group Portrait: Mahāsiddhas in the Alchi Sumtsek," in *Embodying Wisdom: Art, Text and Interpretation in the History of Esoteric Buddhism,* ed. Rob Linrothe and Henrik H. Sorensen (Copenhagen: The Seminar for Buddhist Studies, 2001), 192.

single aspect of content and symbolism of the eighty-four mahāsiddhas ("great adepts"), including their skin color, posture, facial expression, and gestures:

> If trained iconographers today, with the luxuries of convenient reproductions, comparative tools and iconographic concordances, are still unable to distinguish one [mahāsiddha] from another, do we really believe that even the most informed viewer in the late twelfth or thirteenth century would be able to do so at a glance?[35]

Linrothe's focus on viewers' experience—in which the collective identity (rather than individual appearances) of the mahāsiddhas is recognized and understood as testimonies of functionality of tantric teachings—acts as an example for alternative ways to study esoteric Buddhist images.[36] It disrupts the tyranny of texts dominating a field that is artificially constructed by scholars championing an approach of documenting, solving, and decoding images.

Methods

In the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, artworks are not only representations—of particular deities, liturgy, or literature—but also agents embodying transformative power that alter viewers' perceptions of self and world. This transformative power of Tibetan art receives an article-length treatment in Laura Wein's article, "Translating the Tibetan Buddhist Thangka," which explores the "ontological questions about Vajrayāna deities and artwork within which they dwell" through analyzing three thangkas used in different ritual contexts.[37] She critiques that:

> Art historical analyses of thangka paintings are almost exclusively found in museum catalogues and typically take a very straightforward approach to "reading" the works wherein symbols are equated with their "meaning." … Using iconography as designation is contrary to its liturgically defined purpose.[38]

Artworks including paintings and sculptures belong to the Tibetan category of *sku rten*, which literally means "bodily-support," a terms that signifies that the works are an *embodiment* of ultimate reality—in the form of sacred deities—that acts as a *support* to facilitate one's spiritual growth until one realizes that

[35] Linrothe, "Group Portrait: Mahāsiddhas in the Alchi Sumtsek," 190.
[36] Linrothe, "Group Portrait: Mahāsiddhas in the Alchi Sumtsek," 193, 195.
[37] Laura Wein, "Translating the Tibetan Buddhist 'Thangka'," *The Tibet Journal* 41, no. 1 (2016): 46.
[38] Wein, 47.

reality directly for oneself.[39] In line with this "liturgically defined purpose," paintings are not only symbolic diagrams to be read but also sacred objects endowed with deities' agency which liberate viewers through their encounter with them. In "Image as Presence: The Place of Art in Tibetan Religious Thinking," Janet Gyatso proposes a similar position by giving a few examples:

> The sword in the hand of Manjushri shows his severance of emotional attachment; Vajrayogini's three eyes indicate her omniscient vision of past, present, and future; the green hue of Tara's skin color expresses her wisdom-as-efficacious-action… However, the referential function of these iconographic prescriptives is secondary...The very perception of those attributes is thought to remind, or put the viewer in mind, of his or her own inherent enlightenment.[40]

The images of deities are not only self-sufficient objects that *represent* some aspects of Buddhist truth. More importantly, as sacred embodiment, paintings demand interactions with viewers, through which the deities evoke—or *re-invoke*—viewers' presence of Buddhahood latent in their own bodies and minds.

This transformative power is fundamentally soteriological. In *Sacred Art of Tibet*, a work on thangkas' ontology intensively quoted by Wein, the contemporary Nyingmapa teacher Tarthang Tulku teaches that:

> For most men, appearance is obscured and laden with ego-projections. In such a state, our world, our body, and our perceptions cannot provide ego-transcending objects for our meditation, and must temporarily be replaced by an "expanded vision" of the worlds, deities and qualities of awareness depicted in thangka art.[41]

Paintings gift the audience an "expanded," "ego-transcending" vision—a more transcendental view of reality—that temporarily *replaces* the limited and egoistic perception. Art, therefore, creates a soteriological opportunity not imaginable in the mundane experience. In a similar vein, we find another related idea in the contemporary Gelugpa teacher Dagyab Rinpoche's *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture*, which explores the ontology of Tibetan symbols. Besides merely representing "outer and inner reality in concentrated form" or "particular links of significance or meaning," the depiction of auspicious

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[39] Wein, 10, 33.
[40] Janet Gyatso, "Image as Presence: The Place of Art in Tibetan Religious Thinking," in *Catalogue of The Newark Museum Tibetan Collection*, ed. Valrae Reynolds, Amy Heller, and Janet Gyatso (New Jersey: Newark, 1986), 30.
[41] Tarthang Tulku, *Sacred Art of Tibet* (Berkeley: Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center, 1972), 16.

symbols (*rten-'brel*) is "an act of influencing future reality, neither more or less."[42] *Rten* means "support," and *'brel* means "dependence, conditionality," referring to the correct perception of the world where all phenomena are *empty* of inherent existence and arise *dependent* on each other. Functioning as *supports*, symbols influence future reality by prompting the viewers to transform their mundane, deluded view of reality, in which each phenomenon exists with its inherent essence or characteristics, towards an awakened view, in which every phenomenon that exists is based on something already existing and *empty* of any existence of its own. Thus, the significance of symbols is not merely to represent some hidden knowledge but to invoke a higher reality—one grounded in *interdependence* and *emptiness and* transcends all forms of representation, including symbols themselves.

My method takes inspiration from these works' emphasis on the transformative, evocative, and soteriological power of paintings. However, these works are not without problems. By emphasizing the paintings' role of liberating the audience, there is a risk of restricting its soteriological power solely to guiding viewers toward the Buddhahood. But in practice, their soteriological functions extend to a much wider range of situations, including helping individuals accumulate merit, secure a better rebirth, prepare for death, and more. Additionally, by focusing solely on the agency of paintings, symbols, and deities, there is a danger of conflating the agency of the makers with that of the deities themselves, overlooking the fact that these deities' forms are created by human hands. Despite these concerns, this foundational framework remains highly valuable in affirming that *art helps people*. It outlines two most important questions: *what kind of soteriological role does a painting play,* and *how does it achieve such soteriological power?* In this case, my earlier exploration on the symbolism, nature, and "meaning" of the deities represents only the initial step toward understanding the bardo paintings—an understanding that remains incomplete without addressing their soteriological significance, including functions and ritual experiences of the participants.

[42] Loden Sherap Dagyab Rinpoche, *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Somerville, Wisdom Publications), xvi.

Oriented by these two questions, in Chapter 2, I explore the different contexts in which bardo paintings are used, listing six different types of functions and explaining how each of them engages, helps, and transforms the recipients (donors, viewers, devotees, or practitioners). In Chapter 3, I narrow down my focus to one thangka that I believe to be the most interesting one among the HAR collection—the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*—and argue that it has a single function: as a meditative support that helps the advanced practitioner identify with their innate buddha-nature. Only after situating the painting in the particular soteriological context, including time, region, function, makers, and audience, am I able to move on to Chapter 4 in which I demonstrate how three agents—the lama, artist, and practitioner—together create the soteriological program of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala.*

Chapter 2. The Soteriological Functions of Bardo Paintings

Esoteric subject matter does not necessarily indicate an esoteric function. Images representing the peaceful and wrathful deities in the bardo have a wide range of functions—including but not limited to acting as ritual objects in the death ritual and meditative aids for the practitioners. In "A Tour of the Bardo," an introductory article to the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* (Fig. 8), Jeff Watt lists its four possible purposes for the thangka painting: meditation support for personal practice, funerary work, work for instructional purposes, or work of bestowing general blessing.[43] The merit of this introductory article is that Watt successfully points out the wide range of functions and, more importantly, the difficulty of determining a singular function based on the work's content. However, the problem is that we need to be more specific with those categorizations. For example, what is a *funerary work*? Is it a commissioned object *present* at the ritual or an object actively used and *looked upon* by the participants? If the latter is the case, is it a *map* for the deceased wandering in the bardo or a *manual* for the ritual master or the lama when conferring instructions upon the deceased? In this chapter, by examining different kinds of bardo paintings, including thangkas, tsakalis (initiation cards), and murals, I will elaborate on those categories Watt briefly mentioned and propose a more comprehensive analysis of the images' functions. Through an analysis of textual, art-historical, and ethnographic sources, I argue that bardo images have at least six soteriological functions. Namely, they 1) lead the deceased in the bardo, 2) grant initiation and purification to the deceased, 3) generate merit for the deceased and their family, 4) consecrate a space for rituals, 5) teach living devotees, and 6) act as a meditation aid for living practitioners who aspires Buddhahood.

A brief textual-historical analysis that points out the potential audiences of the Karling literature gives us the first glance at the possible functions of the bardo paintings: they are used to help the deceased or (and) the living. In *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in an attempt to differentiate

[43] Jeff Watt, "A Tour of the Bardo," Tricycle: The Buddhist Review, modified Summer 2023, https://tricycle.org/magazine/bardo-practice-art/. Watt lists three possible functions, with the last one being "work for instructional purposes or general blessing." I separate the two since they are completely different.

the "core" and "most central" text from the supplemental ones in the Karling liturgy, Bryan Cuevas argues that the *Self-Liberation of Karmic Latencies* (*Chos-spyod bag-chags rang-grol*)—a Mahāyoga sādhana employing the *zhi-khro* maṇḍala to provide practical instructions to the deceased—is the earliest and most fundamental text.[44] The text guides the dying person to visualize the maṇḍala of one hundred deities and to recall the mantras and mudrās during their journey in the maṇḍala.[45] In contrast, the well-known *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which includes two texts, the *Reminder of the Bardo of Reality-Itself* (*Chos-nyid bar-do gsal- 'debs*) and *Direct Introduction to the Bardo of Becoming* (*Srid-pa bar-do'i ngo-sprod gsal- 'debs*), is derived from the *Self-Liberation of Karmic Latencies*. These two texts belong to the category of special "pointing out" (*ngo-sprod*) meditation texts and are utilized by advanced Dzogchen practitioners rather than an ordinary deceased person.[46] In other words, among the wide range of Karling literature encompassing philosophy, prayers, confession, special techniques, and even a masked drama, the essence of this cycle of literature is sādhanā (tantric "rites of attainment"), used primarily for the deceased wandering in the bardo and secondarily for the advanced practitioners during their lifetime. Since the Karling literature is for two groups of audience—the deceased and the living—it is reasonable to start by saying that bardo paintings play a dual role in guiding the deceased and the living.

Give Visual Instructions for the Deceased

Through a detailed visual analysis—including the presence of two placeholders and the coexistence of scenes from multiple after-life stages—I argue that the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* Watt briefly addresses is an instructional image, probably for the deceased (Fig. 8).[47] The canvas is divided into three sections from top to bottom—differentiated by the background of dark blue sky, light green land,

[44] Cuevas, 102, 113-119.
[45] Cuevas, 105.
[46] Cuevas, 108.
[47] The discussions in this chapter follow the format of elucidating one possible function of bardo paintings with one or two examples. But it is important to note that this mode of inquiry—served to emphasize the diversity of functions—by no means imply that one painting has only one function. In other words, there are overlaps between these six categories, and a painting could have served several purposes, although only the primary one is listed in the main text. For example, although the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* is listed under the section "Give Visual Instructions for the Deceased," it also generates merits and consecrates the space for the death ritual, and could have also been used to give instructions for the living practitioners.

and red hell realm. The central deity Vajrasattva, the progenitor of the peaceful and wrathful deities, connects the top and middle section. Yāma, the lord of death located at the left side of the canvas, connects the middle and lower section. These three sections, top, bottom, and middle, represent scenes from three different after-life bardo states: the bardo of reality, the bardo of becoming, and the bardo of next life.

The first section of the painting instructs the deceased the correct way to perceive the *zhi-khro* deities appeared during the bardo of reality so that they would achieve awakening. There are three maṇḍalas in the first section at the top: the left one housing the peaceful deities, the smaller, middle one housing the "awareness holders" (vidyādharas), and the right one housing the wrathful deities. They emanate from Vajrasattva's crown, throat, and heart respectively. These maṇḍalas as manifestations of rigpa appear during the bardo of reality, the second bardo stage, after the deceased fails to recognize the clear light in the previous stage, the bardo of dying. Vajrasattva, the progenitor of the maṇḍalas, is a special deity in tantric Buddhism that in most cases acts as an "empty sign" of the awakening process and the placeholder for the practitioner.[48] The *Habitual Tendencies* teaches:

> Then, [maintaining the recognition of] oneself as Vajrasattva,
> In the celestial palace of one's own precious heart,
> One clearly discerns a seminal point [formed of] the five lights,
> Whose nature is the five pure essences [of the five elements],
> [And from this], the thirty-six peaceful buddhas radiantly manifest,
> Amidst a radiant and vibrant maṇḍala suffused by the five pristine cognitions.[49]

Although the number of peaceful buddhas does not quite match with the depiction, the passage reveals the role Vajrasattva plays throughout the ritual. In the deceased's journey in the bardo, they are easily overwhelmed and terrified when encountering the deities. Following this diagram, however, the deceased envisions themself as a divine being, Vajrasattva, and recognizes these deities as emanations from their own divine body. Since the bardo deities are now perceived as manifestations of the awakening potential within the deceased's body—whose nature is the "five pure essences" and "five pristine cognitions"—

[48] Rob Linrothe, "Mirror Image: Deity and Donor as Vajrasattva." *History of Religions* 54, no. 1 (2014): 19. https://doi.org/10.1086/676515.
[49] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 67.

they are no longer a source of terror but instead a source of awakening. In this case, the top section of the painting instructs the deceased to realize the nature of the maṇḍalas of deities encountered during the bardo of reality: awakening is achieved in the very moment of realization, but if realization does not occur, they are compelled to travel to the next bardo sage, bardo of becoming.[50]

The second section at the bottom instructs the deceased to anticipate the terror in the bardo of becoming, while urging them to seize the opportunity for awakening. This lower section shows an infernal realm ruled by the Lord of Death, Yāma, and filled with naked infernal beings, animal-headed deities, and torturers. At the right corner, two mountain slopes differentiate this scene of extreme suffering from the red "hot hell" from the white "cold hell" depicted in the bottom row of the right column.[51] The presence of Yāma and his animal-headed attendant shows that it is not a general depiction of the hell realm (as one of the six realm of samsara existence) but a specific image of "the judgement," which the deceased encounters during the third bardo stage, the bardo of becoming. The deceased comes to this terrifying judgement stage because, due to their karma, they fail to recognize the clear light or the maṇḍalas of deities during the previous bardo stages. The judge of death, Yāma, with blazing hair and four faces, each adorned with a third eye and a crown of skulls, looks at the mirror held by the lion-head deity (*las-khan dred-mgo-can*), which shows a reflected image of the deceased's deeds during their lifetime.[52] Yāma's other assistant, the animal-head "karma guide" located at the further right, carries the scales of justice holding white and black pebbles, weighing the deceased's virtuous and non-virtuous karma.

The long-haired naked being kneeling before the tiger-head deity and located at the central bridge of the hell realm and the central vertical axis beneath the first placeholder, Vajrasattva, is probably a second placeholder for the viewer. With a robe tied to its neck, the being has been stripped naked, dragged by three animal-head attendants, and forced to slide down the black path of negative karma. But

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[50] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 274.
[51] Jeff Watt, "A Tour of the Bardo."
[52] Detlef Ingo Lauf, *Secret Doctrines of the Tibetan Books of the Dead*, trans., Graham Parkes (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1977), 135.

with the red-hat lama behind him, we are reminded that the being is still offered a chance for liberation from samsara, namely by recognizing those terrifying scenes as empty, as the *Hearing* teaches:

> From the moment the counting of the pebbles begins, do not be afraid! Do not be terrified! Do not lie, and do not be afraid of Yāma. The body which you now have is a mental body; therefore, even though you experience being slain and cut into pieces, you cannot die. [Recognize now, that] in reality, you need have no fear, because [in truth], your [body] is a natural form of emptiness. The acolytes of Yāma are also, [in reality], natural forms of emptiness—these are your own bewildered perceptions. Your body, formed of mental propensities, is [a natural form of] emptiness. Emptiness cannot harm emptiness…This [stark emptiness] is the Buddha-body of Reality.[53]

For the deceased, just as they are urged to visualize as their innate awakening potential when they look at the three maṇḍalas at top, the terrifying scenes of torture at the bottom should also be seen as empty manifestations of the innate buddha-nature naturally residing in their body and mind. Therefore, the scene as a whole acts as an instruction that reminds and prepares the deceased for the possible tortures: they achieve awakening by identifying the tortures as illusory manifestations of rigpa, but if the realization fails, they are forced to travel to the next bardo stage, the bardo of next life.[54]

Finally, the middle section instructs the deceased to grasp the final opportunity for awakening, as they reach the last bardo stage of choosing a womb for the next birth. The middle section depicts two versions of the bardo of the next life for the being trapped in the bardo of becoming: the blissful buddha-field (Sukhāvatī) of Amitābha, depicted on the left above Yāma's head, and continued six realms of samsara, rendered in six registers each led by a buddha on the right. The deceased, who has failed to recognize the nature of reality in the previous bardo stages, is now offered the final opportunity to escape the rebirth in samsara, through taking birth in the Sukhāvatī. They should recite prayers taught in the *Hearing*:

> Now, this cycle of existence disgusts me! It horrifies me! I have long been led astray by it! Now, the moment approaches for me to move forward! Now, I must take rebirth, miraculously, in the bud of a lotus flower, in the presence of the Buddha Amitābha, in the western Budha field of the Blissful [Sukhāvatī]![55]

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[53] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 280.
[54] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 293. Note that the bardo-being will not stay in the Yāma's hell realm but go to whatever realms of samsara based on their karma.
[55] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 298.

Through reciting prayers and concentrating on the thought of the Sukhāvatī, the naked bardo being, depicted at the central bridge of the hell realm now puts on a monk robe and ascends towards the Sukhāvatī led by the trio—Amitābha at the center, Avalokiteśvara on the left, and Vajrapāṇi on the right—through the zigzagging white path. In contrast, if the recognition failed, it further slides down the black path, suffers more tortures in the judgement, and finally leaves the bardo stage by taking rebirth in either the god, the demi-god, the human, the animal, the hungry ghosts or the hell realm, whichever one that corresponds to his karma.[56]

In general, the three sections of the painting—corresponding to the three afterlife bardo stages—help the deceased walk through the terrifying journey. The thangka first instructs the deceased to envision the *zhi-khro* deities as emanations of their divine body (Vajrasattva); second, if the realization does not occur, instructs them to prepare for the Yāma's terrifying trial and identify the scene as illusory manifestations of reality; and third, if the realization still fails, instructs them to go to the Sukhāvatī to avoid rebirth in samsara. In this case, it is possible that the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* had been carried by a travelling lama and displayed in the funeral rituals when needed. In the ritual, the deceased person, with their surviving consciousness, while listening to the lama's step-by-step instructions (such as those outlined in the Karling texts *Habitual Tendencies* and *Hearing*), anticipates the terror and hope from this comprehensive map and learns the techniques to grasp the final opportunity for awakening. However, this argument remains tentative, as I have not found any ethnographic sources explicitly saying that the deceased would be guided by a particular thangka besides verbal instructions—although it is true that these sorts of bardo thangkas are indeed hung up and present throughout the death ritual.[57]

Grant Empowerment and Purification to the Deceased

[56] There are more instructions in the *Hearing* that guides the deceased to choose an optimal womb entrance within the six realms of cyclic existence if they are obligated to enter one. I will not elaborate due to space limit.
[57] Lauf, *Secret Doctrines*, 76. As my adviser Sara McClintock points out, the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* could have also functioned as an instructional piece for the living meditators. The top section teaches the meditators maṇḍala visualization techniques, referencing the *zhi-khro* deities in the bardo of reality, whereas the bottom and middle sections serve to remind them the consequence of not achieving awakening through the visualization.

Another type of instructional image found in the death ritual is the tsakalis, miniature initiation cards, which are usually half the size of a typical postcard, have a red border, and portray individual deities, small groups, symbols, and seed syllables (Fig. 5). In addition to serving as a didactic image, displayed by the lama one by one to guide the deceased through the bardo journey, its other function is to initiate and purify the deceased through "physical manipulation."[58] Many ethnographic accounts mention that the Tibetan death ritual involves a picture of the deceased (*sbyang-bu*) into which their consciousness is summoned. Through touching the effigy with the bardo tsakalis sequentially, the dead person gets initiated with a blessing of safe journey.[59] Further, among the series of bardo tsakalis, the cards of the six sages seem to play some special roles. According to Tibetologist Detlef Ingo Lauf, the effigy travels in an ordered sequence on a specially prepared surface composed of six sets of cards, each symbolizing one realm of incarnation (Fig. 9);[60] and according to ethnologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, the effigy stays at the same place, while the lama moves the tsakalis towards the effigy.[61] Despite their divergence in whether the tsakalis of the six sages or the effigy are moving, both accounts demonstrate that the effigy embodied with the deceased's consciousness physically touches the sages of the six realms in the order of hell, angry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, and gods. The effect of this physical interaction is to purify all six realms of rebirth so that the deceased will not be reborn anywhere in samsara. Therefore, although bardo tsakalis remain a topic to be further researched, based on these ethnographic accounts, they play at least two roles in death rituals: first, as didactic images used alongside a lama's instructions, and second, as self-sufficient sacred objects endowed with a deity's presence to safeguard the deceased's journey, and, hopefully, purify them out of the miserable samsara existence.[62]

Generate Merit for the Deceased and their Family

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[58] Margaret Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist Funerary Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 104.
[59] Gouin, 25; Christopher von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist Highlanders* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1964), 235; Lauf, *Secret Doctrines*, 127-130.
[60] Lauf, *Secret Doctrines*, 128.
[61] Furer-Haimendorf, 235.
[62] Bardo tsakalis are also used in initiation rites and bardo rituals of the living practitioners, but I will not elaborate on this point due to space limitations.

The last, yet probably the most prevalent, function of the bardo *zhi-khro* image during the death ritual is to serve as an offering that generates merit (*bsod nams*) for the deceased and their family. The *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala*—featuring a standard five-maṇḍala composition in the front, and inscriptions and handprints in the back—is an example of such a special commissioned gift when people die (Fig. 11a, b). In the front, upon the background of gradient sky, land, and clouds, a maṇḍala of wrathful bardo deities dominates the composition, whereas four maṇḍalas of the four buddha families of the peaceful bardo deities, each with much smaller size, occupy the four corners. The remaining peaceful deities, including Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī, Vairocana (conflated with Vajrasattva) and Ākāśadhātvīśvarī, the six sages, and the four gatekeepers are dispersed in the space between the maṇḍalas. In addition to the standard one-hundred-and-two *zhi-khro* deities are the awareness holders (vidyādharas), Jnanadakinis, and Vajrakila-Heruka at the bottom center—constituting a set of 119 deities of the supplemental bardo cycle, an expanded maṇḍala according to scriptures such as the *Teachings of the Great Perfection* (*bKa' rdzogs-pa chen-po*).[63] The patron deities on the top row include some of the most popular deities in Tibet: the trio of Avalokiteśvara, Manjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi, Amitābha, Padmasambhava, Green Tārā, Amitāyus, and White Tārā.

Noticeably, an extravagant amount of gold powders is used in the painting, which replaces the mineral pigments of deities' ornaments, ritual instruments, and at times even the nimbuses, with intricate gold lines. Gold, universally recognized as the symbol of wealth and beauty, prized by both patrons and artists, is perceived as a pious offering. More gold requires more ransom payment for the artist and generates greater merit for the patron—which is so important because merit is the only thing that gives rise to future benefits and happiness.[64] The tiny figure on the left corner, above the maṇḍala of the blue-color Akṣobhya, probably represents the lama of such a wealthy donor—to whom the donor offers the thangka. The figure, in much smaller size than any of the deities, is wearing a monk's robe and yellow

[63] Lauf, *Secret Doctrines*, 82.
[64] David P. Jackson and Janice A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* (Boulder, Shambhala Publications, 1984), 9, 12, 102.

hat, kneeling on the cushion, holding up a maṇḍala offering with an offering scarf or khata (*kha btags*), and piously looking towards the bardo deities and the patron deities. Through the pictorial offering of a maṇḍala sculpture and the actual offering of the thangka as the gift to the lama and monastery, merit is granted for the donor.

On the reverse of the painting (Fig. 11b), the inscriptions of the three mantra letters "OṂ ĀH HŪṂ" on the top and the red handprint of a ritual master below testifies the completion of the consecration ritual (*rab gnas*) that invites divine forces to reside in the object. It is through the consecration that the object becomes "alive" with powers to generate merits for the patron. The inscription in between further articulates the purpose of the commission:

> OṂ SVASATI (May there be auspiciousness!). The play of *rigpa* (primordial awareness) is self-knowing, luminous, and free from all conceptual elaboration. From its ground, the radiance of the peaceful and wrathful ones manifests, arising as a sublime offering and as a field of excellent virtue for gathering merit. By this accumulation of all virtues of the three times, may the victorious teachings flourish and remain for a long time in this world. May the supreme Dharma holders live long, and their activities thrive. May the Sangha community remain in harmony and may their practice and the teachings spread boundlessly. May all degeneration of this dark age be dispelled and remain far removed. May all beings flourish in perfect bliss and well-being. Especially, may Dorjé Tsering's parents, his son Ngodrub Lhazom, Dorjé Tsewang, their young daughters, and all others who are the objects of my dedication flourish. May all their unfavorable obstacles be gradually pacified. May all their aspirations be effortlessly fulfilled, leading them to the state of perfect Buddhahood. May the five degenerations of this age be utterly pacified, and may their virtue shine victorious, like the waxing moon. May all sentient beings pacify their obstacles and amass inexhaustible merit. May they completely accomplish the path of abandonment and realization, swiftly attaining the great city of omniscience. I offer my dedication. May their auspiciousness forever thrive![65]

The prayer begins with Dzogchen philosophy that tells the nature of the deities as the radiance of rigpa. It then articulates that the *zhi-khro* maṇḍalas here have the sole purpose of acting as a "sublime offering" and "a field of excellent virtue for gathering merit." The merit is dedicated to the "victorious teachings," "supreme Dharma holders" (teachers), "Sangha community" (the community of practitioners), "all beings," and, most importantly, the family of a person named Dorjé Tsering. It is evident that Dorjé Tsering, or his family in the name of Dorjé Tsering, commissioned the thangka, and, following the

[65] Unpublished translation by Tsepak Rigzin. Edited by the author.

Buddhist teaching of altruistic motivation, dedicated the merit it generates to all sentient beings except for himself. It was possibly commissioned during Dorjé Tsering's lifetime for the general blessings for him and his family. But, more likely, it was commissioned at Dorjé Tsering's death by his family in his name, since the specific motif of 119 deities from supplemental bardo cycles have such an intimate connection with the afterlife. In either case, the merit would be enormous due to the usage of gold powders, heavy workload of the artists, and the presence of enormous numbers of deities.

Death is a special occasion for commissioning such a thangka to generate blessings for both the deceased and the living. David and Janice Jackson highlight that, in Tibet, death in the family is one of the three most common situations to commission thangkas, the other two being "sickness or troubles" and "the need for an image in connection with a particular religious practice."[66] These memorial or death thangkas are called *skyes-rtags* (literally, "signs of birth"), and they often depict funerary subject matters such as Amitābha, who welcomes the deceased to the pure land.[67] Ethnographic accounts by Margaret Gouin, Eva Dargyay, and Thupten Sangay further elaborate on the role of *skyes-rtags* images during the death ritual. Thupten Sangay accounts that, while offerings are made every seventh day during the prolonged 49-day bardo period, the final, 49th day is the occasion when the statue or thangka was specially commissioned and consecrated, together with a great offering ceremony.[68] Similarly, Eva Dargyay relates that the deceased's families generate immense merit through lavish funerals, commissioning and installing thangkas and statues in the local monastery, paying for the production of illustrated manuscripts, and/or building stūpas. These activities may accomplish three goals: "to assist the deceased in attaining enlightenment, to cleanse the negativities of the living, and to ensure the prosperity and power of their descendants."[69]

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[66] David and Janice Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting*, 9.
[67] Loden Sherap Dagyab Rinpoche, *Tibetan Religious Art* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), 25.
[68] Thupten Sangay, and Gavin Kilty, "Tibetan Ritual for the Dead," *The Tibet Journal* 36, no. 3 (2011): 58.
[69] Eva K. Dargyay, "Merit-Making and Ritual Aspects in the Religious Life of Sanskar (West Tibet)," in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, ed. Ronald W. Neufeldt (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1995), 187.

Finally, I speculate that serving as an offering is the most prevalent function of the bardo thangkas since the eighteenth century. David Jackson argues that the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala* is done in central Tibet (Ü Province) during the eighteenth century, identified by the distinctive central-Tibetan Menri-style three-lobed clouds, clouds without edges, and symmetrical composition.[70] Central Tibet at the middle of the eighteenth-century welcomed the popularization of the xylograph, through which literature and art compositions became standardized and circulated around the surrounding regions.[71] It is possible that these five-maṇḍala compositions served as a standard diagram for artists working around the Ü Province—employed when a wealthy patron requested a painting for the recently deceased and their family.

Consecrate a Space for Ritual

Bardo thangkas do not require a viewer. The thangka's presence alone creates a ritual space by inviting the deities and determining the theme of the ritual. One example is the presence of a funerary thangka in the death rituals, which—regardless of whether it is viewed by the deceased or not—transforms the space from a neutral ground to one endowed with divine energy and suitable for conducting rituals.[72] Another example is the thangkas in Karling ceremonies described by Georgios T. Halkias. Together with other ritual objects, the bardo thangkas build a sacred space for community gathering and the Karling rituals. In "One Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Observations on an Annual Ceremony by the Ngakpas of Rebkong," Halkias describes a *zhi-khro* ceremony that took place in late June 2017, at the village of Sharkarlung (*Zha dkar lung*) in the Tibetan district of Rebkong. A community of approximately 400 male ngakpas (*sngags pa*; non-celibate lay tantrikas) affiliated with the Nyingma school gathered in the village tantric hall to conduct a public ritual ceremony based on Karma Lingpa's treasure. The main rituals throughout the four-day ceremony included expiation and confession, supplications to lineage teachers and religious protectors, bestowal of initiations, ritual cake offerings, and

[70] David Jackson, *The Place of Provenance: Regional Styles in Tibetan Painting* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2012), 36.
[71] Cuevas, 24; Blancke, 277.
[72] Lauf, *Secret Doctrines*, 76.

sādhana practices related to visualization of the bardo *zhi-khro* maṇḍala.[73] Halkias noticed that the inner courtyard occupied by the lay tantrikas was adorned with five colored Buddhist flags and several thangkas depicting *zhi-khro* maṇḍala of Samantabhadra, Samantabhadrī, and surrounding deities (Fig. 10).[74] In this case, bardo thangkas are not overtly related to death at all but appeared in a space full of living participants. Together with prayer flags, they set up the the focal point of rituals—the maṇḍala of deities in the Karling lineage—and the proceeding activities, prayer, offering, supplication, initiation, and visualization, were all centered around this motif, which, the practitioners believe, helps them achieve awakening. Further, the sacred painting as the focal point fosters the communal bonds between participants, as expressed by the two banners suspended between the bardo thangkas. They read:

> May the faction of the holders of the three vows, with white clothes and clotted hair, this assembly, be thoroughly established in this place, through extensively hearing, reflecting, and meditating, and may the Vajrayana teachings spread.
>
> Without making up the clotted hair on the head, without affectation letting the white clothes hang on the body, and without artifice beholding the true face of the natural state; in respect to these three uncontrived [aspects], one is called a ngakpa.[75]

With those inscriptions, the sacred objects are embodied with the ngakpas' shared sense of community, and their sacred power blessed the community so that they would continue to thrive. Not necessarily an artwork to be looked upon, the thangkas consecrate the ritual by fostering religious practice and communal relationships.

Give Instructions for the Living Devotees

The *Bardo Thodol* mural at Chenrezik Lhakang, a temple building located at the northern section of the Lamayuru monastic compound near Leh, Ladakh, serves as an example of instructional images for the living ordinary devotees. Although the Ladakh mural's contents bear a large degree of similarity to the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* (Fig. 8)—based on the same source text *Hearing*—we still need to

[73] Georgios T. Halkias, "One Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Observations on an Annual Ceremony by the Ngakpas of Rebkong" in *Vajrayana Buddhism in the Modern World* (Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH, 2018), 116-117.
[74] Halkias, 118.
[75] Halkias, 119-120.

discuss them separately, as the viewers in this case are the living rather than the deceased. The argument is made based on its architectural setting, narrative sequence, and inscriptions. Chenrezik Lhakang was built and decorated in the middle of the nineteenth century. The mural depicting the bardo deities is in the hall featuring a large eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara (Chenrezik) statue. The 12 meter-long, one-and-a-half meter-high mural occupies the north-eastern wall, surrounded by murals depicting the Jātaka tales (previous lives of the Buddha), the final life of the Buddha, and another Avalokiteśvara, in the south-east wall, ceiling, and north-west wall (Fig. 13a).[76] Given that the temple is dedicated to Avalokiteśavara—the most popular deity in Tibet and the surrounding regions under Tibetan cultural influence—and further decorated by some of the most popular narrative themes throughout Buddhist art history, it is almost impossible the space has any association with death rituals. Instead, it is for public gathering, worship, and, perhaps, learning. According to the informants of Kristin Blancke, nowadays, in Lamayuru, local people visit the temple mostly during the first fifteen days of the Tibetan new year and one week during summer, when they congregate to recite one hundred million Avalokiteśvara mantras.[77]

Among the depictions of the popular Buddhist subject matter, the esoteric bardo murals seem to be out-of-place. But through an analysis of its narrative sequence and inscriptions, one realizes that it serves the same purpose as its neighbors, that is, to help the general public understand and apply Buddhist teachings. The mural is divided into two rows. The upper row starts with the image one perceives at the end of the bardo of dying, the primordial buddha Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī. It then shows scenes from the first seven days of the bardo of reality, the peaceful deities, first one by one, then all together, and finally the five vidyādharas with their entourage. The scene of the bardo of reality, from the seventh to the fourteenth day, continues at the second row, which shows each of the wrathful deities, one by one, after which the row divides into two. The upper row depicts the wrathful assembly and a general terrifying scene one encounters during the bardo of becoming, featuring fierce winds, floods, fire,

[76] Blancke, 275-277.
[77] Blancke, 275.

cannibals, and beings falling from mountains. The lower row continues with the remaining scenes from the bardo of becoming, from the fifteenth to the forty-ninth day, showing the Yāma's judgement, the deceased looking for places of rebirth, and potential places of rebirth such as the four continents and five realms.[78] Despite its complicated theme, the mural is organized in a way that is understandable to the most ordinary devotees. The presentation of deities and narration follows a strictly temporal sequence, progressing day by day from the first to the 49th, so that, despite the complexity, each viewer can clearly follow the teaching while proceeding from left to right and from top to bottom. Further, besides these scenes one encounters during the bardo, there are also visual diagrams telling the viewer what to do in those encounters. There are also inscriptions of each deity's name and textual instructions, through which the viewers would not misinterpret the artist and the lama's intent.

A brief look at Vairocana and Ākāśadhātvīśvarī, the first deity-pair at the top row, for example, strengthens the point about the identity and the experience of the viewers (Fig. 13b). Encountering this image, one notices two peaceful deities sitting on a lion throne against a nimbus of rainbow light. While in sexual embrace the male deity is holding an eight-spoked wheel on his left hand and a bell on the right hand. In addition, a blue light decorated by a series of white dots emanate from the male deity's right side of the body towards a naked devotee at the bottom of his throne. A naked being, with his hands joined in prayer, faces two lights, a blue one from the deity and a white one coming from somewhere else. While perplexed, one moves closer to the mural and notices the inscription below the embraced deities which reads: "On the first day after regaining consciousness, from the central pure land [called] Pervasive Seminal point appears the Tathāgata Vairocana, in yab-yum [with his consort]." Below Vairocana, the inscription next to the blue light reads: "light of dharmadhātu wisdom," and that next to the white light reads: "white light of the gods' realm." Through the visual and textual instructions, one identifies the represented deities as Vairocana and his consort, the first deity-pair appearing during the bardo of reality. One also learns that, during that encounter, one would confront two rays of light, and the better choice is

[78] Blancke, 280-291.

to identify with the blue light coming from the buddha instead of the white light of samsara suffering in the gods' realm.

This section depicting the devotees' interaction with Vairocana speaks for the entire mural. While it is a faithful representation of the *Hearing*, the mural visually reduces complex encounters into simple scenes and textually recontextualizes an esoteric teaching—presented in the second person and featuring many references to advanced meditation instructions belonging to the Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā lineages—into simple, short, descriptive lines in an impersonal form, that is easy to understand and memorize.[79] Therefore, the mural at Ladakh Chenrezik Lhakang is not out-of-place. It serves the same function as the surrounding scenes of popular Buddhist themes, that is, to help ordinary devotees understand aspects of Buddhist teachings and apply them when most necessary.

Act as Meditation Support for Living Practitioners

The last function of bardo images is to act as a meditation support for the living practitioner—the routine meditators who have learned basic Buddhist philosophy and undergo mind-training and tantric practice such as deity yoga (imagining oneself as a deity). It is true that didactic images such as the Ladakh mural (Fig. 13a) have the capacity to serve as visualization aids due to represented deities' intricate details. But here, my purpose of differentiation is to shed light on those images that are particularly made to help seasoned meditators through their sādhanās. In other words, those images are not only to be looked at, interpreted, and propitiated with offerings, but also interacted with, and re-created through one's visualization. Since this interactive and inventive quality during the viewing process is one of the most special and fascinating aspects in Tibetan art, I will give two examples of such works, starting from a thangka used for relatively straightforward maṇḍala visualization to a mural painting used for cryptic practices.

First, the *Jatsön Nyingpo and Bardo Maṇḍala* is probably made for maṇḍala visualization (Fig. 14). It shows the famed Nyingma treasure-revealer Jatsön Nyingpo (1585-1656) on the upper right corner,

[79] Blancke, 292.

identified by his red pandita hat and distinctive posture of his right arm extending straight into the air, holding a double vajra, and left arm resting below, holding a phurba (ritual dagger). On his left side, the top left corner of the canvas, is Padmasambhava, from whom Jatsön Nyingpo's bardo teachings are derived. Since Padmasambhava and Jatsön Nyingpo are the only two lineage figures in the composition, the painting was probably made in Jatsön Nyingpo's time, that is, the seventeenth century, when the next lineage line has not yet been established. The subjects are four maṇḍalas derived from Jatsön Nyingpo's lineage—which is almost identical to that of Karma Lingpa—totaling 117 deities, composed of two large maṇḍalas in the center housing peaceful and wrathful deities and two small maṇḍalas on the sides housing vidyādharas and jnanadakinis. Noticeably, it is extremely difficult to simply take a maṇḍala and say precisely that it is used for meditation—and, indeed, the maṇḍalas we have discussed in the previous sections are not used for meditation, and some are not even to be looked at.[80] Still, due to the presence of lineage figures and rigorous architectural compositions, it is probably made—or, at least, could be used—for esoteric visualization. The viewer is probably a seventeenth-century practitioner who got initiated to the bardo practice from his lama Jatsön Nyingpo.

The most unique thing about the composition is that each of the two large maṇḍalas follows a palatial structure common to Tibetan art, featuring a circle of protection, a square architectural base, four walls, four T-shaped gates, and different levels. The palace is shown in a plan view, as if seen from above, while the four outer gates and deities inside are shown in the side (front) view. The two small maṇḍalas also have an interesting eight-petal structure where the four petals in the intermediate directions are partially overlapped by the other four holding deities. It is true that these palaces' complexity cannot rival that of the more popular maṇḍalas, such as the famous Kālacakra Maṇḍala—whether in the number of presiding deities or the amount of ornament—but it is still significant as this is the only palatial-structured bardo thangka I have encountered. Others, such as the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala* (Fig. 11a),

[80] Loden Sherap Dagyab Rinpoche, *Tibetan Religious Art*, 26; Christian Luczanits, "Ritual, Instruction and Experiment: Esoteric Drawings from Dunhuang." In *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross Culture Perspective*, ed. Anupa Pande, & Mandira Sharma (New Delhi: National Museum Institute-Aryan Books International, 2009), 45.

even though rendering a geometrical and spatial relationship between deities, never articulates the walls, gates, or levels. During the practice session, the practitioner, facing the *Jatsön Nyingpo* hanging scroll in the home shrine, closely examines the picture, concentrates clearly on every detail of the composition, and finally, without looking at it, recreates a picture of palaces with deities in his mind. When the clarity of the mental image fades, they look back at the scroll and repeat the process.

The thangka and mental image obey their own representational conventions. On the one hand, the painter follows iconometry (rules of proportion) texts, artist books, and other artworks, which standardizes lines (length, width, and direction) and shapes (the location of lines and relationship between lines) of two-dimensional maṇḍala images. They draw the individual elements and their surface relationship, including the frontal view of deities, gates, and garlands hanging from the wall and the plan view of the walls and ground surface. On the other hand, the practitioner follows a tradition of visualization practice. They have learned the form of actual, three-dimensional maṇḍalas from ritual texts, lamas' instructions, or sometimes, the encounter with rare three-dimensional maṇḍala sculptures. After close examination, they deconstruct the two-dimensional representation, retain the individual elements' relationship to one another, and invent a three-dimensional maṇḍala.

The general principle for the meditator is that they should strive to visualize those deities as clearly as possible, identify them not as mystical beings but manifestations of inner buddha nature, and always remember the emptiness and insubstantiality of their mental image. Facing the *Jatsön Nyingpo*, for the wrathful maṇḍala, the practitioner visualizes a palace rising within a rainbow sphere filled with multicolor lights. The palace has six levels decreasing in size. The two levels underneath have square bases with four gates, each protected by a gatekeeper, whereas the four on the top have circular bases, without gates, surrounded by an aura of multicolored lights. For the peaceful maṇḍala, the practitioner visualizes a palace of two main levels. The first level has a square base, with four gatekeepers and six sages standing in the hallway, and the second level is circular, with five buddha families, each sitting upon a circular platform amid an aura of rainbow lights. Since the central circle slightly overlaps the other four on the thangka, the practitioner, in their visualization, creates a slightly elevated circular platform for

the central deities—Samantabhadra and Vairocana with their consorts. There is a clay model of a *zhi-khro* maṇḍala published in Martin Brauen's *Maṇḍala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* that captures the spatial relationship between the figures on the second level (Fig. 15).[81] The central deities, Vairocana and Buddhalocanā, are higher than all the surroundings in the model. (Blue-body Samantabhadra and white-body Samantabhadrī are absent.) However, the visualized image of the *Jatsön Nyingpo* is still different in detail. Rather than turning their back towards the central platform, as seen in the model, the four buddhas each surrounded by four bodhisattvas are facing the center. The hierarchy of scale, however, is probably accurate, since, on the thangka, buddhas are slightly larger than the attending bodhisattvas.

The maṇḍala visualization is not the only way one interacts with a bardo image. It belongs to the generation-phase practice (*bskyed rim*), in which the practitioner uses a thangka as the source of mental image, imagines a maṇḍala, and then identifies themself with the deities in the maṇḍala. The goal is to create a vision of transcendence in stark contrast to one's mundane existence. The counterpart is the perfection-phase practice (*rdzogs rim*), the phase to bring those imaginative "generations" to "perfection," where they discard external representations as aids, focus directly on the ultimate, empty nature of mind, and manipulate "the subtle body, the channels, winds and nuclei" (*rtsa rlung thig le*). The goal is to actualize those transcendental mental existence and physically reincarnates oneself as a divine being.[82] However, bardo images can also be used in Dzogchen practices, the most advanced class of teaching according to the Nyingma school, in which they play a role beyond the bifurcation of and perfection stage. This mode of interaction is often cryptic without direct guidance from an awakened Buddhist master, but I will briefly discuss it, using an example from a mural painting in the Lukhang, Lhasa.

The Lukhang is a three-story temple built on an island in the lake behind the Potala Palace. Its full name, *Rdzong rgyab klu khang*, literally means "the water spirit house behind the fortress." Following the construction of the Potala in the second half of the seventeenth century, a lake was formed due to the

[81] Martin Brauen, *Maṇḍala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Stuttgart, New York: Arnoldsche, Rubin Museum of Art, 2009), 178.
[82] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 219-221.

excavation of building material. It is believed that the nagas (water spirit) were disturbed by this, and, to pacify them, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-82) promised to appease them by building a temple as a place for regular propitiatory rituals.[83] The origin and function of Lukhang, however, is still in debate. The most compelling argument, put forth by Ian Baker and Gyurme Dorje, and supported by the present Dalai Lama, is that, rather than being built during the Fifth Dalai Lama's time, the temple was originally built by Tibet's then ruling political regent Desi Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705) at the time of the Sixth Dalai Lama and then renovated by the Eighth Dalai Lama in 1791.[84] Not only a place for propitiation rituals of the nagas, the Lukhang also served as a private retreat for the Sixth Dalai Lama (and probably also the proceeding ones). The chamber at the second floor, with its murals covering 17.2 square meters, depicts various Dzogchen motifs centered around the biography, practice, and instructions of the famed tertön Padma Lingpa's (1450–1521) revealed treasure, *Rdzogs Chen kin bzang dgongs 'dus.* It provided a private meditation space for the most advanced practitioners, namely the Dalai Lamas and their closest preceptors and attendants.[85] Amid the complex sectarian political climate at the turn of the seventeenth century, since the motif of the non-monastic teaching of Nyingma Dzogchen tradition was perceived to pose much threat towards the ruling Gelug monastic order (led by the Dalai Lamas), this meditation chamber had been kept secret and hidden from the non-initiates.[86]

The north wall, measuring 1.35 m x 4.4 m, is the largest mural in the temple. It is filled with esoteric subjects against a landscape, including practicing yogins, divine beings, rainbow-colored light spheres (*thig le*), visions, visualization diagrams, and scientific illustrations. Amid these maximalist esoteric scenes, the one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities of bardo appear in the middle part of the north wall (Fig. 16a). They are depicted individually and divided into two sections. The top section lists

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[83] Jakob Winkler, "The rDzogs Chen Murals of the Klu-khang in Lhasa," in *Religion and Secular Culture of Tibet: Tibetan Studies II*, ed. Henk Blezer and Abel Zadoks (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 321–322.
[84] Winkler, "The rDzogs Chen Murals," 322-323; Ian A Baker, "Moving towards Perfection: Physical Culture in Dzogchen as Revealed in Tibet's Lukhang Murals," in *Imagining Chinese Medicine*, ed. Vivienne Lo, Penelope Barrett, David Dear, Lu Di, Lois Reynolds, Dolly Yang (Brill: 2018), 403.
[85] Winkler, "The rDzogs Chen Murals," 340; Baker, "Moving towards Perfection," 406, 420.
[86] Baker, "Moving towards Perfection," 412.

peaceful deities, beginning with five pairs of tathāgatas in *yab-yum* and ending with four gatekeeper-pairs. The bottom section, starting at the left bottom corner and ending at the right corner, lists fifty-eight wrathful ones, from five herukas to eight Mātaraḥs.

In addition to the inscriptions at the bottom of each figure that helps full identification, between the two sections are two buddhas in rainbow-colored light spheres, two yogins, a naked body, a vase and a mirror, which guide the practitioners in their interaction with the bardo deities. The presence of the blue-color Samantabhadra and white-color Vajrasattva tells that this bardo practice is originated from the conversation between the two buddhas—which is recorded in the source text of Padma Lingpa.[87] To the left, the naked body, vase, and mirror probably reference Dzogchen cosmogony, in which the primordial ground, in the image of "youthful-vase body" (*gzhon-nu bum pa'i sku*), manifests into mirror-like samsara existence.[88] Together, they set up the philosophical framework of understanding the surrounding bardo deities in which the viewer sees them as empty, illusory manifestations of rigpa. Below, one yogin is depicted in the profile view: his upper body is naked, and he is kneeling on one knee, looking up towards the bardo deities, and emanating five tathāgatas from his mouth. The other yogin is depicted in the frontal view: he is wearing casual clothes covering his full body, his eyes stare forward, and an empty circle emanates above his crown. The meditation of these two yogins possibly illustrate two different ways of interacting with the bardo deities, one visualizing deities in physical forms, and the other visualizing them as emptiness, indicated by the empty rainbow circle.

All my interpretations above remain tentative, since there are no textual instructions in this section. One thing that we are certain about, however, is that, although depicting the same subject matter, the Lukhang mural invites a fundamentally different viewing experience compared to the Ladakh mural (Fig. 11). Self-evident from my descriptions, the image is not interpretable for ordinary devotees but

[87] Winkler, "The rDzogs Chen Murals," 331.
[88] David Germano, "The Shifting Terrain of the Tantric Bodies of Buddhas and Buddhists from an Atiyoga Perspective," in *The Pandita and the Siddha: Tibetan Studies in Honour of E. Gene Smith*, ed. Ramon Prats (Amnye Machen Institute, 2007), 79.

created for those who have preparatory knowledge including tantric meditation experience and familiarity with the source text of Padma Lingpa.

Finally, another detail on the same wall indicates one more way of practice involving bardo images. What is shown here is an architectural interior (Fig. 16b). There are six sculptures covered with multicolored silk, and, behind each sculpture, six thangkas depicting bardo themes. The thangka on the left end depicts six peaceful deities, while each of the other five depicts one wrathful heruka. Below the sculpture and thangkas are offering bowls and three human figures sitting in the direction of the images. The figure on the left is holding a mirror on his left hand and makes a wrathful mudrā (gesture) of threatening with his right hand. The inscription on the left reads:

> At noon, after the meal, while looking towards the north, display images of the peaceful and wrathful deities with brocade and ornaments and cover your eyes with a mirror. Resolving the peaceful and wrathful deities.[89]

Here, *resolving* means introducing the deities and identifying them with oneself. The figures' mudrā of threatening might be a way to *resolve* the wrathful deity. Following this instruction, the practitioner goes beyond the traditional framework of seeing, imagining, and joining the deities but adds an additional step of blocking or alternating their vision with a mirror. This manipulation of the sense faculty, probably another unconventional Dzogchen method, highlights the diversity and complexity in the bardo meditation.

In general, different bardo paintings help different types of people in different ways. Some work requires viewing, through which the viewers learn the Buddhist teachings and become well-prepared in the bardo journey. Others requires more rigorous examination and re-creation in the mind, through which the meditators become familiarized with the deities and gradually invoke their innate buddha-nature. Others do not require viewing, as their presence alone creates a communal space for ritual participants. Others do not even require the artworks' presence, as their commission alone creates merits for the donors.

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[89] Unpublished translation by Tsepak Rigzin. An alternative translation is found in Ian Baker, *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings from Tibet*, photo. Thomas Laird (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 80.

Chapter 3. The Soteriological Site of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*

Among images that incorporate bardo deities or scenes as their main subject matter, the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* stands out for its beautiful landscape background, rare maṇḍala composition, idiosyncratic iconography, intricate lines, and distinctive color palettes (Fig. 1). One reason I choose to focus on this work is its unparalleled artistic quality. Even though we are familiar with the subject matter through a discussion of a variety of bardo images, a brief glance at the detail still gives us a feeling of freshness. Look at the astonishing portrayal of each figures' face, body, clothes, and instruments; observe the golden light rays emanating from each circle; notice the extraordinary range of colors and forms that differentiates the groups; and appreciate the overall geometry that resolves all contrasts. One rarely sees such a painting that balances individual (human figures and deities) and collective elements (maṇḍalas and landscape) so well—to such a degree that both elements draw the eye at first glance without one overshadowing the other. The other reason to focus on this thangka is its rare iconography. Although these hundred-fold bardo deities are the exact same group we have discussed in Chapter 2 for the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* (Fig. 8), the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala* (Fig. 11a), and the *Jatsön Nyingpo and Bardo Maṇḍalas* (Fig. 14), etc., many of them—such as Mahottara Heruka, Samantabhadra Buddha, sixteen bodhisattvas, six sages, and eight Mātaraḥ—digress from the standard iconographic or iconometric conventions for these figures. The fourteen circles of colors geometrically arranged in the bottom maṇḍala are also rare (which is why I titled the piece *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*), in the sense that I have not yet found any other cases of their appearance in maṇḍala thangkas. Further, the maṇḍala structure, which implies an architectural layout yet devoid of actual representations of palaces, is very much unique.

This chapter acts as a transition between Chapter 2 and 4, expanding and applying the former chapter's analytical methods to one painting—the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*—and providing a basis for Chapter 4's exploration of the transformative discourse among the lama, artist, and practitioner. My goal is to lay out the soteriological context of *the Colored Dots*—the socio-religious context during the production of the painting, the function it plays within that context, and the participants contributing to

the program. Related questions include: When and where was the thangka made? What religious movement was it associated with? What was its intended function or context of use? Was it used in a death ritual, displayed in a collective space, commissioned to generate merit, or housed in an individual meditator's home? Who actualized this function? Who made the thangka? Who was the donor? Who was the audience, if it had one? After much investigation, I conclude that it most likely was made in mid-nineteenth century Tsang province (western-central Tibet) by practitioners of the Rimé (non-sectarian) religious movement. It was used as a meditation aid for sādhana practices—commissioned by a Nyingmapa practitioner and made by a Nyingmapa lama and a master painter.

Date, Region, and Religious Context

The *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* was most likely made in the mid-nineteenth century Tsang Province, based on the usage of blue and green pigments, the depiction of clouds, sky, and figures, and the presence of lamas from two different sects. In his introduction to a series of seven maṇḍala masterworks depicting Nyingma subject matter, Jeff Watt dates the *Colored Dots* to the nineteenth century and claims that it follows Khyenri style—a central Tibetan artistic tradition originating with the painter Khyentse Chemo (mid 15th century).[90] Khyenri style, most often associated with the fifteenth century murals in Gongkar Chode Monastery, is known for its bright palette, attention to small details, portrait-like faces, a strong sense of realism, and almost perfect circles of nimbus surrounding the deities.[91] It is also particularly famed for the depiction of tantric wrathful deities and maṇḍalas.[92] However, the list of descriptions are too broad to be applied to actual images. For example, any thangka masterwork could be said to have "attention to small details" and "portrait-like faces." Further, the problem with this identification is that the term "Khyenri style" refers to a wide range of visual qualities—constantly transforming, adapting to,

[90] "Nyingma Maṇḍala Masterworks," Himalayan Art Resources, uploaded Feb 15, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlAjDxnycwM.
[91] Tsechang Penba Wangdu, translated by Tenzin Gelek, "Murals of Gongkar Chode: Reexamining Khyentse Chenmo and His Painting Tradition," *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/murals-of-gongkar-chode.
[92] David Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting: The Great Tibetan Painters and Their Traditions* (Austria: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1995), 160.

and combining with other artistic trends, such as the Menri, New Menri, and Karma Gar-ri style—making it difficult to use for purposes of dating and determining provenance.[93]

Since Watt does not give explanations on why the painting is in Khyenri style and why it is dated to the nineteenth century, we need to find the dating and provenance elsewhere—through an analysis of painting materials, textual descriptions that better match with our image, paintings of similar quality, and the iconography of lineage figures. In the *Colored Dots*, besides the red pigments rendering conventional motifs such as monastic figures' robes and hats, and wrathful deities' flames, the two most prominent pigments are blue and green. In the peaceful maṇḍala, the artist applies a whole layer of blue paint without any modification, as if they are trying to display the quality of the raw pigment. In the background, the canvas is filled with tints of green from top to bottom, featuring light green clouds and sky, and dark green land, mountains, trees, and figures' halos. These two pigments converge in the depiction of a mountain edge on the right side of the canvas, above the lama: here, cliffs alternate between blue and green, each featuring a gradient from dark to light. The predominant presence of these two colors indicates that the Tsang Province might be the place of provenance. Tsang, bordered at the eastern edge of Nemo County, the home of mines that produced highly prized copper pigments, is famed for its "Tsang azurite blue" (*gtsang mthing*) and "Tsang malachite green" (*gtsang spang*), which are valued even higher than gold according to some artists.[94]

In *The Place of Provenance: Regional Styles in Tibetan Painting*, David Jackson also summarizes a series of typical features of the Tsang-ri thangkas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including 1) dark-blue skies; 2) pale pink and orange clouds—in addition to the more commonly painted pale blue and green ones; 3) clouds with special shading—in contrast to the Eri-style seen in the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala*; 4) deities' head ornaments with the front three jewels or skulls clustered together; and 5) human figure in partial profile.[95] The *Colored Dots* almost perfectly fits the description, featuring such dark-blue

[93] "Painting Tradition: Khyenri Art History," Himalayan Art Resources, last modified April 2020, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=6270
[94] Jackson, *The Place of Provenance*, 57.
[95] Jackson, *The Place of Provenance*, 53-55, 60.

sky, pink and orange clouds, the three clustered jewels and two distanced jewels in each peaceful deities' crown, and Padmasambhava shown in the profile view.

One might be better convinced through a comparison between the *Colored Dots* and a famous Tsang-ri thangka made in the mid- or late eighteenth century, *The First Panchen in a Set Depicting His Previous Lives* (Fig. 17). First, both paintings share a similar color palette featuring a background transitioning from dark blue, to light blue, to light green, and then to darker green. The green halos with golden outlines share the same quality, and the deity on the right, at almost the identical position in both compositions, share the exact quality of gray. The only difference is that the dark blue pigments in the *First Panchen*—seen beneath the pink clouds, filling the nimbuses of the two deities on the left column and the lake at the bottom—are shown in the bottom maṇḍala in the *Colored Dots*. Second, in the *First Panchen*, the stylized clouds at the topmost section, each featuring a wavy, zigzagging tail, find their peer at the topmost section in the *Colored Dots*, in which the green clouds drift outwards, like silk billowing through the air. Also, the techniques of shading the clouds are similar. The pink and white clouds in the *First Panchen* have two layers, the bottom of which contains shading made of darker hues. The artist of the *Colored Dots* applies a similar technique in rendering the orange clouds, which also feature two layers distinguished by the shades at the bottom. Third, in the *Colored Dots*, Padmasambhava is shown in a profile view, a rare appearance that I have not seen in any other thangkas. The realistic facial expression, direction of the turn of the head, the direction of the folds on the hat, and the three sharp, almost-geometrical folds of the fabric at the bottom of the throne show much similarity to the portrayal of *First Panchen*.

Due to the correspondence with the *First Panchen* and Tsang-ri characteristics Jackson proposes, we tentatively conclude that the *Colored Dots* was made in Tsang Province in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. If we want to be more specific, the mid-nineteenth century might be the most possible date, since the coexistence of lamas from two different sects echo the Rimé (*ris-med*, non-sectarian) movement at that time. Among the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism, Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug, the painting unambiguously depicts Nyingma motifs. As we have discussed in Chapter 1, the subject matter

of one hundred deities belong to the Nyingma school, either the most popular Karma Lingpa tradition or other Nyingma treasure traditions that employ a similar set of deities. The lama on the bottom right corner belongs to the Nyingma sect, identified by the treasure-revealer hat, a lotus hat with the sides folded up and the top decorated with a half vajra. The protector deity on the bottom left also belongs to the Nyingma sect. Her name is Ekajaṭī, identified by her huge golden earrings and one braid of hair standing upright in the air, whose role is to protect the Nyingma treasure teachings from unclean force or immature practitioners.[96] However, in the group filled with Nyingma deities, lamas, and protectors appears a Sakya lama, shown in the left middle, identified by the Indian Pandita hat with the addition of two lappets folded over the crown.[97] The presence of a Sakya lama in a Nyingma scene is rather uncommon in the era of sectarian independence—that is, pre-nineteenth century Tibet—either in artistic representations or in monasteries and society in general. It is common for Kagyu lamas to appear in a Nyingma context—since both schools focus on esoteric and practice-orientated teachings, share a similar philosophical view in the teaching of Kagyu Mahāmudrā and Nyingma Dzogchen, and endorse the Karling bardo liturgy. However, the friendly cross-sectarian dialogues did not apply to the Nyingma and Sakya school, until the mid-nineteenth-century Rimé movement, led by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye Yonten Gyatso (1813-1899), Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820-1892), and Orgyen Chokgyur Lingpa (1829-1870).[98] However, the speculated date of the painting could be slightly earlier, since many eighteenth-century authors, such as the influential Nyingma treasure-revealer Jigme Lingpa, also adopt a non-sectarian approach in their teachings and practices.[99]

Function

[96] "Buddhist Deity: Ekajaṭī Main Page (One Braid)," Himalayan Art Resources, last modified December 2019, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=206
[97] "Nyingma Maṇḍala Masterworks." Watt claims that the commissioner of the painting is a Sakya practitioner, probably based on the presence of this Sakya lama. Although I agree the lama is a Sakyapa, I disagree that he is a contemporaneous figure, or the commissioner is a Sakyapa practitioner. I will elaborate on this point later.
[98] Peter Oldmeadow, *Rimé: Buddhism without Prejudice* (Shogam, 2012), 1-7.
[99] Oldmeadow, 40-43.

Chapter 2 presents six different functions of bardo paintings, each aimed at helping either the deceased or the living. By applying these six categories and comparing the *Colored Dots* with other bardo paintings, I argue that the *Colored Dots* is intended to benefit the living. It is not related to death—it is neither a funerary work designed to guide or empower the bardo-being, nor a *skyes rtags* intended to generate merit for the deceased. The first point is established through comparing the work with the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* (Fig. 8). While the *Vajrasattva* includes bardo scenes from three post-mortem stages—the bardo of reality, the bardo of becoming, and the bardo of next life—the *Colored Dots* completely eradicates the latter two. These two omitted sections are essential for the deceased, much more important than its top section, because the majority of bardo-beings do not have such spiritual capacities for self-liberation in the bardo of reality and place their only bet in the bardo of becoming or bardo of next life.[100] Without images of these two stages, the *Colored Dots* loses all its power to help the deceased in the time they need most help. It thus does not work as a comprehensive visual guide for the deceased.

The second point is established through comparing the lineage figures of the *Colored Dots* and the *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala* (Fig. 11). The *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala*—and, sometimes, other standard five-maṇḍala bardo paintings—contain a row of deities at the top, a place often reserved for lineage figures in Tibetan art. However, these deities depicted there are not really lineage figures—meaning historical teachers who hold the knowledge of a particular teaching and pass it on from one generation to the next. Instead, they are popular patron deities in the Tibetan pantheon, not particularly associated with the bardo subject depicted below. The purpose of this additional row of deities is to invite the presence of some more powerful deities, maximize the number of deities depicted, and eventually maximize the merit the deceased and their family receive. In contrast, the figures depicted on either side of the *Colored Dots* are lineage teachers and deities, who are not merely used to generate merits. Instead, they serve the purpose of establishing the history of the bardo liturgy and protecting its future lineage transmission. The

[100] Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, 147.

lineage includes six figures, listed in an order according to the Tibetan hierarchy in which the most important figures are located at the top right and the least important are located at the bottom.[101]

> 1) Padmasambhava: the first human teacher of the bardo liturgies.[102] He is said to have received these teachings from heavenly buddhas and concealed them as buried treasures for the benefit of future beings. He also wrote prophecies foretelling the arrival of future treasure revealers, enlightened beings believed to be reincarnations of Padmasambhava's original disciples, endowed with the power to unearth these treasures.[103]
> 2) Amitābha: the "heavenly buddha" who confers the knowledge to Padmasambhava.
> 3) Unidentified Sakya lama. Given his parallel position right below Padmasambhava, he is likely a historical figure who had some forms of karmic relation to the legendary master, engaged in the transmission of the terma liturgies, and is considered one of the early originators of this ritual together with Padmasambhava.[104]
> 4) Akṣobya. Here, one needs to distinguish Amitābha and Akṣobya from the peaceful deities in the maṇḍala. The former are shown in Nirmāṇakāya form (Earthly form) wearing monk robes, indicating their earthly interaction, i.e., transmission of teaching, with the humans, while the latter are shown in Sambhogakāya form (Illusory form) wearing jewelry and garments, indicating their heavenly residence that is seen only by bodhisattvas or advanced practitioners.
> 5) Ekajaṭī: a protector deity rather than a lineage holder. Still, she plays an equally important role in this lineage group in protecting the lineage from inappropriate sources—including those who are unsuitable (uninitiated) to receive the teachings.
> 6) Unidentified contemporaneous (mid-nineteenth-century) Nyingma lama. Although we cannot identify the last lama, we are certain that he is a contemporaneous Nyingma teacher at the time of the commission. Lamas, following the conventional visual hierarchy, often ask artists to humbly position them at the lower right corner, the least important location.[105]

Among the lineage figures, the presence of treasure-protector Ekajaṭī alone excludes the possibility that the painting was used in any ordinary person's death ritual to generate merit. Instead, it qualifies the viewer to be a living practitioner initiated into the teaching. Together, the presence of a complete lineage history identifies the audience as an initiated practitioner, the only group of audience that requires such specific historiography.

To be more precise, the function of the *Colored Dots* is to serve as a meditation support for the initiated practitioner, rather than an instructional painting. The distinction between the two is important

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[101] Conversation with Christian Luczanits on November 22, 2024.
[102] Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, *Hidden Teachings of Tibet: An Explanation of the Terma Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*, ed., Harold Talbott (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 1986), 50.
[103] Janet Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History: A Tantric Buddhist Theory of Scriptural Transmission," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9 (1986), 8-9.
[104] It is still very interesting how a Sakya lama is among the lineage of Nyingma bardo teachings. Is he a tertön? Does the contemporaneous Nyingma lama receive teachings from this Sakya tertön? Or does the Nyingma lama combine the teaching of Padmasambhava and the teaching of this Sakya lama to develop his own system? This detail warrants further research.
[105] Conversation with Christian Luczanits on November 22, 2024.

and remains as a point of confusion. Watt categorizes the piece as a "maṇḍala-like circular form" rather than a maṇḍala. The word "maṇḍala-like" seems to emphasize the painting's diagrammatic quality over its ritual significance.[106] However, for me, the thangka is not merely didactic, instructive, illustrative, or demonstrative: it demands a viewing experience featuring close, rigorous, and repeated examination and re-creation in the viewers' mind and body, not just merely interpreting the image. One sees this point through a comparison with the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* (Fig. 8), an explicitly instructional work. The top section of the *Vajrasattva*, as we have discussed in Chapter 2, instructs the deceased to identify themselves with the placeholder Vajrasattva and then emanate maṇḍalas of bardo deities from their crown, throat, and heart. Without assuming any prerequisite knowledge of the audience, the lama teaches the deceased through the diagram, regarding which deity they should envision themselves to be, and how and where to visualize the maṇḍalas from this deity. In contrast, in the *Colored Dots*, without the articulation of Vajrasattva's form, the makers of the image assume that the viewer has already been familiar with the form of Vajrasattva to a degree that they need no more image as reference. They presume that the viewer has been taught of the whole visualization process so that they no longer need a placeholder and arrows to guide their actions. As the practitioner knows exactly what to do, the image no longer serves an instructional or demonstrative function. Instead, it suggests another purpose—presenting the deities as a foundation for the practitioner's meditative re-creation.

Furthermore, the *Colored Dots*' composition, which emphasizes both the bodies of the deities and the practitioner, enhances its effectiveness as a meditative aid. First, compared to the deities within the *Vajrasattva*'s maṇḍalas, the deities in the *Colored Dots* exhibit tremendously more details.[107] This level of intricacy strengthens their role as supports for deep and rigorous contemplation. For example, let's

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[106] "Maṇḍala-like," Himalayan Art Resources, https://www.himalayanart.org/pages/maṇḍalalike/index.html; "Maṇḍala: Maṇḍala Main Page," Himalayan Art Resources, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=9. Watt defines maṇḍala as a "circular diagram, highly technical and precise, representing an idealized Tantric Buddhist, Hindu, or Bon meditational space and surrounding idealized environment, the container and contained, animate and inanimate." Given that the *Colored Dots* and other bardo paintings are categorized as "maṇḍala-like," the implication is that they have similar circular forms but do not provide "meditational space."

[107] The only finely rendered deity in the *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes* is Vajrasattva, as one clearly sees the gentle facial expressions, a series of necklaces resting on his upper body, and even sandals on his right foot. But that again demonstrates my point that it serves a teaching purpose for those who are not familiar with Vajrasattva's form.

compare the dark-brown Buddha Heruka and consort at the bottom of the innermost circle of the wrathful maṇḍala in the *Vajrasattva* (Fig. 8) and the same figure in the right of the innermost circle of the wrathful maṇḍala in the *Colored Dots*. In the former, one sees all the conventional heruka features including the male deity's towering hairs, three faces each with three eyes, six arms, four legs standing in wrathful posture, the tiger-skin loincloth (worn by both male and female), the wings, and the flames at the back. In the latter depiction, in contrast, in addition to all these characters mentioned above (except for wings, which here are absent, showing that the artist is following a different artistic tradition), one sees many additional details. They include two layers of white animal skin hanging on the heruka's shoulders, the naked human bodies crushed under the feet, overwhelmed by the size of the heruka, and the instruments in each of the six hands, including a sword, skull cup, plough, and axe (and the indistinguishable instruments on the middle two hands).

The addition of these details not only adds artistic quality but proliferates ritual significance. As the shapes of the deities' body are the *acts* of their Buddhahood, each additional ornament, instrument, and hand gesture adds complexity to their *acts* and challenges the practitioner—who understand those *acts* through repeated visualization practices.[108] For example, in the *Transition and Liberation: Explanations of Meditation in the Bardo*, the contemporary Tibetan teacher Tenga Rinpoche teaches how Buddha Heruka acts through his form.

> Buddha Heruka's three faces embody the achievement of three buddha bodies, dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya; the six arms embody the power to liberate all beings of the six realms of existence; the four legs embody the four immeasurable power of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity; the crushed humans embody enemies of awakening; swinging the axe embodies cutting through all ego-clinging; swinging the sword embodies cutting away the three afflictions of desire, anger, and dullness; holding the plough embodies overcoming not only all karma but also all the afflictions and karmic imprints of all beings; holding the skull cup embodies the achievement of dwelling on the level of Buddhahood but nevertheless remaining in samsara in order to benefit other beings.[109]

These descriptions by no means limit the deities' features to a particular set of "meanings." Rather, they outline certain actions of the deities, which in practice could be interpreted in a variety of ways,

[108] Gyatso, "Image as Presence," 30.
[109] Tenga Rinpoche, 79-80.

depending on the meditators' experience.[110] With these additional details, the image of deities provides a basis for rigorous looking, experiential (rather than conceptual) understanding, and sophisticated visualization—a quality that deities in instructional paintings, such as the *Vajrasattva*, do not possess.

Second, when encountering the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*, the practitioner physically aligns their body with the thangka. This embodied interaction highlights that the thangka's significance lies in facilitating a meditation program that integrates both mental and physical creation. Since the composition—with the wrathful maṇḍala at the top and the peaceful maṇḍala at the bottom—reflects their actual locations in one's crown and heart, the practitioner perfectly aligns their body with the image while facing it, an embodied interaction central to the goal of identifying their body as an awakened site. This emphasis on the practitioner's body is not possible in the non-meditational thangkas, such as the *Vajrasattva* (Fig. 8) and *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala* (Fig. 11). In the former, since the two maṇḍalas are horizontally aligned, practitioners would not engage in the same bodily alignment. The same applies to the latter, in which the peaceful deities are dispersed into four groups and scattered as isolated figures across the canvas, making it difficult for practitioners to achieve the crucial sādhanā step of aligning with and visualizing the assembly.

Further, in the encounter with the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*, the practitioner also aligns their body in accordance with the precise location of each individual deity. Each assembly has a rigorous layered structure, in which deities of the same category are located at the same level in the circle, either at the five cardinal directions (center, east, south, west, north) or the intermediate directions (southeast, southwest, northwest, and northeast) (Fig. 3). This spatial relationship between figures—exhibited in the thangka and reproduced in one's body (through aligning the body with the image) and mind (through visualization)—is not articulated in the two non-meditation works. Take the wrathful maṇḍala for example. In the *Vajrasattva*, there are only four levels, in which the eight Mātaraḥ, eight Piśācī, and four female gatekeepers are grouped at the same level around the third ring. Similarly, in the *Standard Bardo*

[110] Marylin M. Rhie and Robert A. Thurman, *Worlds of Transformation: Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, the Shelley and Donald Robin Foundation, and Tibet House, 1999), 42.

Maṇḍala, there are only three levels, in which all the heterogenous deities—Mātaraḥ, Piśācī, female gatekeepers, and Īśvarīs—are put into one group at the outer ring, and almost none of the deities, besides the four herukas, follow the cardinal locations assigned to them in the sādhanā. In the non-meditational thangkas, the decision of grouping the heterogenous deities likely results from the makers' intent to trade religious precision for compositional clarity. Since these two thangkas are not for rigorous contemplation and visualization, they do not require precision to the highest degree. In contrast, with deities of the same type grouped at the same level, the *Colored Dots Mandala* targets only the meditator, the type of audience who needs the utmost precision—as a slight error in the deities' location in the maṇḍala-body alters their mental-physical image, obstructs their spiritual practice, and produces detrimental effects on the path towards awakening.

The Identity and Role of the Lama, Artist, and Practitioner

The soteriological program of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*—to serve as a meditative aid for a practitioner's spiritual growth—was created and completed by three agents. They are the lama who initiates the program by determining the subject matter, the artist who interprets the lama's instruction and creates the painting, and the practitioner who influences the thangka-making process and completes the program by realizing the divine reality depicted in the painting.

First, the lama, depicted in the right bottom corner of the *Colored Dots*, is a nineteenth-century Nyingmapa master, a lineage-holder of a particular branch of bardo-*zhi-khro* liturgy, whose authenticity is established through the series of lineages traced back to the Padmasambhava. He acts as the initiator of the program, who recognizes his student's (the practitioner's) spiritual capacity, determines the appropriate maṇḍala for their practice, and conveys special instructions to the artist. In his book *Thangka Painting Method*, David Jackson hints at the role of lama in the production process:

> By the time the painter sat down to begin his sketch he already had in mind the main contents and design of the thangka. Usually, the patron had indicated to the painter precisely which deities he wanted depicted. Sometimes the patron also furnished a diagram that showed the names and relative positions of each figure in the painting, such diagrams often having been composed by the lama of the patron.[111]

[111] David and Janice Jackson, 25.

> In paintings where the deities had been individually chosen by the patron or his preceptor, the different scale of measures usually did not express a priori hieratic distinctions, but only the main focus and descending priorities of the particular composition as determined by the patron or by the lama who originally advised him to commission the thangka.[112]

Jackson describes the initial steps in creating a general thangka painting, including selecting the subject matter and designing the overall composition. In the case of the esoteric, meditational thangka *Colored Dots*, however, the practitioner, who is not a master yet, does not necessarily know which deities they want depicted and which cycles of teachings they are going to cultivate for their best benefit. Instead, they need some help from their lama, who understands which teachings the practitioner needs the most and how the teaching should be presented to accommodate his student's particular spiritual capacity. Here, the lama is probably following a source text—a particular bardo-*zhi-khro* liturgy which he has received from his lama—but at the same time adjusting the prescribed teaching based on the students' inclination. Based on these insights, he then tells the painter which subject matter to depict and how they should be depicted—including the "scale of measures," "main focus," and "composition"—either through diagrams or verbal instructions. Note that the lama's instructions to the painter are not limited to the beginning of the painting program. Instead, the lama frequently visits the painter throughout the process, offering continuous guidance.[113]

Second, the artist is a nineteenth-century master painter working around Tsang Province, who has demonstrated excellent skills in rendering the landscape, maṇḍalas, and individual deities. It is very likely that they have not seen the popular standard five-maṇḍala bardo painting circulating around the artists' circle around the time (Fig. 11), since their rendering of the maṇḍalas and some less popular deities (i.e, the Mātaraḥ, Piśācī, and Īśvarīs) are completely different. Artists have the most complicated job among the three agents, for they have to excel in both religion and art. Gega Lama, a contemporary master painter of the Karma Gar-ri school, recounts that when he departed from Tibet to India in 1959, he was forced to leave behind his books, offering utensils, and images, together with most of his painting

[112] David and Janice Jackson, 70.
[113] Dagyab Rinpoche, *Tibetan Religious Art*, 27.

manuals and diagrams.[114] These series of personal belongings hint at the role of artists in the creation process. On the one hand, they practice rituals with offering utensils and, perhaps, learn Buddhist philosophy from books. On the other hand, to paint, they reference other artworks, painting manuals, and diagrams. Let me break down these two points so that we can have a clear understanding of the artists' work.

The maker of the sacred image does not have to be a monk: there are both lay and cleric artists, but in either case, they are required to earn adequate religious knowledge of the subject matter before they start painting. According to Dagyab Rinpoche, if the subject of the commissioned work is esoteric—such as yidam (meditation deities) and *srun-ma* (guardian deities)—it is necessary that the artist is an initiate of the tantric class to which the subject belongs and receives the lama's permission, consecration, and blessings, which enable them to recite and meditate on the mantras of the deities they are about to depict. In certain cases, they also need to spend some time in meditation retreats so that they clearly understand symbolism and associated rituals.[115] Gega Lama similarly emphasizes on the artists' familiarity with religion. According to him, a good artist has an adequate understanding of Buddhism to a degree that they can distinguish between subject matter of higher and lower tantra. When portraying deities of the inner tantras (higher teachings), they must have received the appropriate empowerment and ideally perform the meditation daily or at least recite the mantra of the deities continually.[116] Since the subject matter of the *Colored Dots* belongs to the Nyingma inner tantras, the artist is probably a seasoned practitioner familiar with both literature and practice.

Artists, most often born in a family of painters or image-makers, spend many years of apprenticeship under a master, when they learn techniques of preparing the surface, making the composition, sketching, applying pigments, shading, and outlining, until the final test of demonstrating

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[114] Gega Lama, *Principles of Tibetan Art: Illustrations and Explanations of Buddhist Iconography and Iconometry according to the Karma Gardri School* (India: Darjeeling, W.B., 1983), 11.
[115] Dagyab Rinpoche, *Tibetan Religious Art*, 27-28.
[116] Gega Lama, 57-58.

skills in drawing the eyes, outlining, and painting in gold paint.[117] The most fundamental yet most important technique, however, is the sketching of deities, which has to conform to the exact measurements and proportions established by iconometry texts and artistic tradition. Painting according to the correct proportion is an absolute requirement for Tibetan artists—although the definition of "correct" varies according to the specific iconometry texts and conventions of each painting school. It is often said that an ill-proportioned work, with features such as a crooked nose and ears, small and squinting eyes, wrong posture or carrying wrong instruments, is not only erroneous but also done by "no-better than an evil force."[118] It is said that the maker of an ill-proportioned image will "always be afflicted with pain, suffering, and unhappiness" or "be reborn as an animal in future existences," and such bad images also produce negative influence on donors, bringing "demerit" instead of merit or auspiciousness.[119]

Although it is not possible even for the master painter to know all the proportions, configurations, and characteristics of each of the thousands of deities in the Tibetan pantheon, they have to be familiar with the main iconometric classes into which the pantheon was divided and be able to apply this knowledge to the less common deities (Fig. 18).[120] The novice painter is required first to construct a grid of exactly positioned lines, and then to draw within it the sacred figure. Through years of practice, repeatedly drawing grid lines and copying examples of buddhas and bodhisattvas, the shape and proportion of each major deity become firmly impressed upon the artist's mind so that they can construct figures with only a minimum of guidelines and measures. A mature painter who masters the basic proportions could apply these rules by analogy to unfamiliar deities, as long as they have determined their iconometric class.[121] In this case, the artist of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* is both a practitioner of bardo liturgy—who is familiar with the esoteric deities through ritual experiences—and a master painter—who is familiar with the representation of those deities according to an artistic tradition.

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[117] Dagyab Rinpoche, *Tibetan Religious Art*, 28.
[118] Dagyab Rinpoche, *Tibetan Religious Art*, 21.
[119] Pema Namdol Thaye, *Concise Tibetan Art Book* (Kalimpong: New Monastery, 1987), 67; Dagyab Rinpoche, *Tibetan Religious Art*, 25.
[120] David and Janice Jackson, 49.
[121] David and Janice Jackson, 49-50.

Third, the practitioner is a nineteenth-century practitioner who has received the initiation and permission of practicing bardo maṇḍalas from their lama. Due to the extravagant application of rare azurite pigments, the donor-practitioner is either very wealthy or has a special status, such as that of a young reincarnated lama (tulku), whose goal is to learn important sādhanā from their teacher. In either case, the practitioner is undoubtedly the most important one among these three agents, since the entire soteriological program is created for them and centered around their spiritual growth until they eventually reach Buddhahood. On the one hand, the practitioner influences every decision of the lama and the artist. In the "Methodological Comments regarding recent Research on Tibetan art," Christian Luczanits calls attention to the role of donors in the production process:

> Regardless whether an Indian, Nepalese, or Tibetan made an object, it was created for a Tibetan donor to express his intimate relationship with what is represented. This Tibetan donor certainly had a considerable influence on the way a deity or thangka was represented. However, this contribution of Tibetans to their art preserved in their country is hardly a topic in publications on Tibetan art. [122]

According to this quote and the Jacksons' previous quote on the role of the patron and the lama, the practitioner often directly tells the artist how certain aspects of the painting should be depicted. In other words, they are not only the viewer but also one of the makers: it is necessary for them to join the production process, as they are the one who eventually hangs the work in their home, does ritual practices in front of it, and develops an *intimate relationship* with it. In the *Colored Dots*, however, due to the practitioner's unfamiliarity with the esoteric subject (as they haven't started practicing yet), it is possible that the lama and the artist (who may have been familiar with the practice) makes decisions on their behalf. Still, as the ultimate intent of the lama and the artist is entirely based on the particular spiritual inclination of the practitioner, the practitioner exerts considerable—though indirect—influence on the content.

On the other hand, the program is not complete until the practitioner uses the thangka, contemplates and recreates the content in their mind, and benefits from the result of spiritual practice.

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[122] Luzcantis, 140.

According to Gyurme Dorje's introduction to the *Habitual Tendencies*, ideally, the practitioner should do the full bardo sādhanā four times a day in an extended solitary retreat—after they complete the preparatory philosophical studies and meditational practices over many years. Following this extended retreat, the full practice should be done at least monthly, and a concise practice (such as those outlined in *Habitual Tendencies*) should be done three times a day, in the morning, at midday, and in the evening, throughout the practitioner's life.[123] A basic meditation framework is outlined as such in *Habitual Tendencies*:

1) recite the ten-branched prayer,
2) conduct purification by identifying oneself as Vajrasattva,
3) visualize a palace in one's heart, emanating peaceful deities,
4) identify and pray to each peaceful deity,
5) visualize the peaceful assembly and pray,
6) visualize a palace in one's skull, emanating wrathful deities,
7) identify and pray to each wrathful deity,
8) visualize the wrathful assembly and pray,
9) pray to the assembly of peaceful and wrathful deities.[124]

Through studying and memorizing key texts in the bardo liturgy, the practitioner establishes the precondition of the sādhanā: a basic familiarity with the iconography of each of the hundred deities and conceptual understanding of the Dzogchen philosophy. Through repeated practice in front of the thangka, identifying depicted deities with their own mind and body, they firmly grasp the location and nature of the deities, even in their dreams, and develop a sustained recognition that all phenomena, sounds, and thoughts are, in essence, the body, speech, and mind of the deities.[125] Since the peaceful and wrathful deities are manifestations of rigpa, the primordial awareness, the practitioner progresses towards a truly-felt, unwavering realization that all his impure experience is manifestation of the pure experience. When the impure experience is recognized as pure, there is nothing impure anymore, and thus the practitioner reaches Buddhahood.

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[123] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 61.
[124] Gyurme Dorje, 61–91. The steps of visualizing a palace in one's throat and identifying and praying to the awareness holders—which occur between the visualization of peaceful palace and wrathful palace—are omitted since the awareness holders are not depicted in the thangka.
[125] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 61.

In summary, then, the *Colored Dots* was probably made and used in the mid-nineteenth-century Tsang Province, amid the Rimé movement of increasingly open dialogues among different sects and lineages. It functions as a meditative aid for a living practitioner, who uses the image as a basis for sādhanā practices including visualization, prayers, etc. This soteriological program depends on the participation of the Nyingma lama who holds the authentic lineage of bardo teachings, the master artist who is familiar with both the deities and their representations, and the initiated practitioner who receives permission from that master: without any of them the program would not exist. Depending on their collective efforts, the goal of the program is to realize the innate Buddhahood of the practitioner.

Chapter 4. Ground, Path, and Result of the Soteriological Program titled the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*

After exploring *what* kind of soteriological program the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* creates, we move to the last topic—*how* the lama, artist, and practitioner, makes this program possible. The creation and fruition of the program of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* depends on interaction between the lama, artist, and practitioner: it is not reduced to any of these three agents but emerges out of the conjunction of the three. In this perspective, when we are looking at the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*, what we are witnessing is not just a representation of esoteric teachings, or a sacred object embodying the deities' essence—but also a residue of the relationship between these three people. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the soteriological program comes into existence and realizes its goal—that is, to help practitioners achieve Buddhahood—and how the lama, artist, and practitioner contribute to the soteriological power of the painting through their interconnected, creative work.

I use the Dzogchen framework of *ground*, *path*, and *result* to show how the lama, artist, and practitioner establish each of the three aspects of awakening. Dzogchen (The Great Perfection), as we have discussed, is the highest yoga in the Nyingma system, which renounces all philosophical views and methodological paths, except the omnipresence of naturally-present pristine cognition or rigpa. All phenomenological experience, samsara or nirvana, delusion or wisdom, is the manifestation of rigpa—which has many names including pristine cognition, primordial mind, non-dual mind, mind-as-such, Mind, transcending mind, non-conceptualizing mind, and so on. Since one already possesses this primordial wisdom, awakening is not attained by any spiritual paths that require intellectual elaboration but by simple, direct experience and realization.[126] The division of ground, path, and result describe a practitioners' progress towards awakening: the ground is the philosophical view that rigpa is the natural condition of all experience, the path is the meditative techniques to recognize the presence of rigpa, and the result is the full realization of rigpa.[127] This Dzogchen framework is an ideal way for us to explore the

[126] Dudjom Rinpoche, *Jigdrel Yeshe Dorje: The Nying-ma School of Tibetan Buddhism—Its Fundamentals and History*, trans., ed. Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 295-318.
[127] Tulku Thondup, trans. *The Practice of Dzogchen: Longchen Rabjam's Writings on the Great Perfection*, ed. Harold Talbott (Boston: Snow Lion, 2014), 177-186.

experiences of the lama, artist, and practitioner, for it is exactly the underlying principle behind these three participants' actions. As we have discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, the lama and practitioner are both Nyingma lineage-holders, and the bardo-*zhi-khro* practices—regardless of the Karling lineage or others—are based on Dzogchen philosophy.

Ground

The idiosyncratic form of the two maṇḍalas in the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* establishes the ground of awakening. By replacing the palatial structure with the colored space, the lama and the artist establish a simple and natural view of the maṇḍalas—the prerequisite of the practitioner's practice. The *Habitual Tendencies* follow a generational-phase body-maṇḍala framework, which teaches practitioners to visualize their body as palaces of deities. The wrathful palace resides in the crown; the peaceful resides in the heart; the individual deities reside in various places within the subtle body, such as the "western channel branch of the skull [crown]" (where Padma Heruka resides), "outer eastern channel branch of one's skull" (where lion-headed Siṁhamukhī resides), and "channel branch at the northern gate of one's heart"(where Amṛtakuṇḍalin and Ghaṇṭā reside).[128] Although there are detailed descriptions on the location of each deity, the text does not specify which kind of palaces practitioners ought to visualize. There are architectural references in the language, with words such as "gate" and "courtyard," but the text does not include detailed iconography such as the shape, the number of levels, colors, and so on.

The lack of textual specificity leaves plenty of room for the lama and the artist's interpretation, based on religious insight or (and) reference to other maṇḍala paintings. In the *Jatsön Nyingpo* (Fig. 14), a meditational thangka, the makers sketch two square-based palaces surrounded by an aura of rainbow light. There are six levels in the wrathful palace and two main levels (four levels if we consider the slight elevation of the buddhas) in the peaceful one, and the top levels all have a circular base in contrast to the square base at the bottom. The rainbow light emphasizes the non-material, empty nature of the emanation of palaces and deities, and the circular floors on the top serve to differentiate the central, more important

[128] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 80, 82, 72.

groups from the peripheral, less important groups. Also, each palace is divided into four sections corresponding to four cardinal directions: the east, south, west, and north, each featuring a background color of blue, yellow, red, and green. These colors again differentiate the deities into the four buddha families symbolizing the four types of wisdoms—mirror-like wisdom (blue), wisdom of sameness (yellow), discernment (red), and accomplishment (green).[129]

In contrast, instead of outlining a palatial plan composed of gates, hallways, and multiple levels, as shown in the *Jatsön Nyingpo*, the lama and the artist in the *Colored Dots* design a maṇḍala featuring a universal-colored background. The replacement of a complicated palace with a simple, colored space establishes the view of simplicity, naturalness, and absence of methodology—central to Dzogchen philosophy. First, through eliminating all levels and unifying all colors, the makers create two simple maṇḍalas. This simple version reduces the complexity in the practitioner's visualization: the practitioner is free from the complexity of differentiating and categorizing deities based on colors and levels. Those additional steps of intellectual investigation are replaced by a straightforward encounter with spaces characterized by universal color.

Second, these maṇḍalas of red fire and blue sky are not only simple but natural and uncontrived—inherent in one's mind and body. The wrathful realm features a circular ground of flames, whereas the peaceful realm features a dark blue ground filled with repeated grids. For the former, the artist expands the red flame, a common iconography of individual wrathful deities, to the entire maṇḍala. As fire is one of the five elements that burns away impurities but also refines and transforms them through the process of burning, it embodies such transformative power of the wrathful ones, who "pulverize" one's mundane experiences and "transform" the mundane state of mind into the awakened state.[130] For the second, the artist gives the peaceful realm a dark blue background. Dark blue, often associated with a cloudless sky, embodies the primordial state of mind that dissolves the cloud-like

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[129] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 388-389, 395-396.
[130] Francesca Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 80; Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 88.

obscuring and transient thoughts. The endlessly repeating square patterns upon the background—a decorative design based on the swastika (svāstika)—also evoke the vastness and boundlessness of an awakened mind with infinite possibility.[131] Together, they embody the shared quality of the peaceful one: the enlightened mind that unwaveringly remains in the purified, undisturbed, and unborn state.

These two colored grounds establish the unique view of Dzogchen that emphasizes a natural, uncontrived, and stress-free mode of practice.[132] In the *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, the renowned Dudjom Rinpoche (1904-1987), then head of Nyingma School, introduces such a view:

> The maṇḍalas and burnt offerings,
> The torma offerings and recitations counted on rosaries,
> The sedentary vajra-like and dramatic postures and so forth
> Are fallible with respect to this freedom from conceptual elaboration.
> For there is nothing to be done,
> And nothing either to obstruct.[133]

Dzogchen features a rhetoric that rejects all methods involved in lower vehicles such as Mahāyoga. Although in reality Dzogchen practitioners do practice maṇḍala visualizations (such as the practitioner of the *Colored Dots*, obviously), what is put forth here is the view that since one is inherently enlightened, "there is nothing to be done." Those active, *forced*, structural paths to control one's mind or body (such as meditation in vajra posture, torma offerings, generation-phase maṇḍala practice, perfection-phase control of the subtle bodies) are secondary to the direct realization, in which one passively *lets go* and *surrenders* to the spontaneity of experiences, which is nothing but apparitions of the rigpa.[134] Here, even though the practitioner is still doing a maṇḍala-visualization in front of the *Colored Dots*, the makers minimize the effort and techniques they need. There are no longer complex, multi-level, ornamented palaces the practitioner should *forcefully* construct in their mind. Instead, these colored grounds are inherently present in one's body. The ground of fire, embodying the purifying power of *rigpa*, that continuously transforms

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[131] Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 343-352.
[132] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 213.
[133] Dudjom Rinpoche, 304.
[134] Germano, "The Shifting Terrain of the Tantric Bodies of Buddhas and Buddhists from an Atiyoga Perspective," 78.

the mundane experience into awakened form, is inherently residing in one's crown. The ground of blue sky, embodying the naturally purified state of rigpa, is inherently residing in one's heart. In this case, the practitioner is not forcefully *constructing* something entirely foreign to his mind and body—such as a palace shown in the *Jatsön Nyingpo* (Fig. 14)—but *surrendering* to the power latent in one's mind and body. Therefore, through these two naturally existing, *uncontrived* colored grounds, the makers establish the view, or the ground of practice, for the practitioner. The practitioner does not need to rely on overly complex knowledge or esoteric techniques. Instead, the only prerequisite of the practice is simply being aware of the presence of rigpa within their mind and body.

Path

While the makers' portrayal of the collective space of deities establishes the ground for practitioner's practice, the makers' choice and rendering of individual elements—such as the deities and colored dots—establishes an individualized path for the practitioner based on their spiritual inclination. First, the making of rare, one-face-two-arm Mahottara Heruka and rare, ornamented Samantabhadra provides the practitioner with an appropriate starting point of visualization. In all other bardo paintings (Fig. 14, for example), Mahottara Heruka always appears with three faces, six arms, four legs, and sometimes with wings. He embraces Krodheśvarī with two of his arms, hands holding a vajra and bell, while Krodheśvarī raises her left leg to surround his belly and raises her left arm with a skull bowl. As the leader of the wrathful maṇḍala, Mahottara Heruka shares the exact three-face-six-arm form with the other five herukas, distinguished from them by its dark brown color and instrument in each hand. In the *Colored Dots*, however, while the other five herukas still have three faces and six arms, Mahottara Heruka (located on the left of the central circle) obtains a one-face-two-arm form, in which only his front face and the two arms embracing his consort remain. The number of faces and arms are not the only difference between Mahottara Heruka and his neighbor Buddha Heruka: the former shares the same height with the latter but has a significantly larger head, longer hair, and larger proportion of head to the body. Here, the artist is not simply taking those faces and arms off Mahottara Heruka but sketching him after a completely different model from another iconometric class. For example, if one follows the

iconometric system given in the seventeenth-century treatise compiled by the regent Desi Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705), one finds that the measurement of five herukas is modeled after the class of deities including Vajrakila, whereas that of Mahottara Heruka is not referencing any sketches in the text. Mahottara's head-to-body proportion is larger than that of Vajrakila but smaller than Vajrapāṇi (Fig. 18).[135] Even though the artist is probably following another iconometric treatise, it is clear that, by sketching Mahottara with a distinctive set of measurements, they aim to distinguish him from his neighbors.

But why does the artist, or the lama, articulate Mahottara's distinction from other herukas? This choice is especially perplexing since neither the *Habitual Tendencies* nor the painting traditions had ever favored an abbreviated form of Mahottara Heruka—distinct from the other herukas. The text names the same three-face-six-arm iconography for all six herukas.[136] And I have not seen a one-face-two-arm form in the history of Tibetan paintings, let alone in the late period of art (mid-nineteenth-century) where the popular deities' forms are more or less standardized.[137] A story about the interaction between Nyingma master Zurchung Sherab Drakpa (1014 - 1074) and devoted sculptors—narrated by Dudjom Rinpoche—may shed light on this question.

> When the Zurchungpa request the sculptors to make an image of Yangdak Heruka [Shri Vishuddha Heruka], they made an "appropriate image of the *fruitional* Heruka, who has three faces, awesome, wrathful, and laughing, and six arms," only rejected by the master, saying that "it does not resemble my [his] vision" and asking them to make it again. The next day, in the accompaniment of sculptors, Zurchungpa conducted a ritual where he propitiated Mahottara Heruka, performed the feast offerings, and eventually "adopted the gaze of the deity" to actually become Heruka. The master obtained "a fearsome and wrathful apparition, with one face, two arms, gnashing teeth, and twisted tongue, his head resplendent among the clouds and mist, his right foot resting upon the face of Heruka Rock in Ukpalung, his left foot upon the summit of Mount Tsepak Purkang. His indestructible wings filled the sky." The sculptors, overwhelmed by the radiance, lapsed into unconsciousness, and when they woke up, they asked the master if he could manifest into a three-face six-arm Heruka so that they could re-create the image.

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[135] Christoph Cüppers, Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp, Ulrich Pagel, and Dobis Tsering Gyal, ed. *Handbook of Tibetan Iconometry: A Guide to the Arts of the 17th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), Pl.93, 187.
[136] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 78-79.
[137] "Buddhist Deity: Mahottara Heruka (Chemchog)," last modified March 2023, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=228. Watt lists the four manifestations of Mahottara Heruka, including the one-face, three-face, nine-face, and twenty-one-face form. He claims that the latter three are the main forms depicted in art, while "it is possible to find a simple one face and two-arm form of Mahottara although this is rare."

> Zurchungpa said: "That is too profound. Owing to the needs of those requiring training, it was the [*causal* Heruka] Heruka with one face and two arms that appeared."[138]

In Tibetan thought, deities' agency manifests in their changing forms. As sambhogakāya are the immeasurable manifestations of the ultimate dharmakāya, sambhogakāya deities—such as Heruka—are totally *fluid* and *mutable*. It is often said that the deities' body changes according to the spiritual needs of practitioners.[139] However, it is the lama and the artist who actualizes the deities' agency. Here, for Zurchungpa, a three-face six-arm one is a *fruitional* Heruka who appears when one's practice matures, whereas a one-face two-arm Heruka is a *causal* Heruka who appears at the beginning of spiritual practice. The former "does not resemble his [Zurchungpa's] vision" because it is too profound for "those requiring training." Instead, Zurchungpa assumes the body of a one-face-two-arm *causal* Heruka to serve as the model for the sculptors because it is the most suitable for the practitioners at this stage. Although, in this example, the subject matter to be depicted is Yangdak Heruka, while it is Mahottara Heruka in the *Colored Dots*, the same logic applies. It is possible that the lama replaces the profound form with the elemental form to create a program in which the practitioner does not aim too high at the beginning of the practice and only gradually proceeds to their goal. The lama's argument is that: although these deities are indeed inherent in the practitioner's body, and, according to Dzogchen view, the practitioners simply need to *surrender* to their presence, they still need to go through a gradual path as preparation for the instantaneous result. If this is the case, the practitioner's visualization experience changes through practice: they first need the thangka as a reference point to construct their vision, but, as they gain deeper realization, the representation of *causal* Mahottara Heruka loses the supportive function, and the practitioner identifies with the *fruitional* Mahottara Heruka within their mind and body without looking at the thangka.

This argument may also apply to the idiosyncratic form of the ornamented Samantabhadra Buddha, who is the Mahottara Heruka's counterpart in the peaceful realm. In Tibetan art, Samantabhadra

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[138] Dudjom Rinpoche, 625-628.
[139] Tarthang Tulku, 18.

always appears in a naked blue body embracing Samantabhadrī in a naked white body. Their nakedness and absence of garments embody the naked truth of the ultimate dharmakāya body, which features an absence or transcendence of all representations.[140] In contrast, in the *Colored Dots*, Samantabhadra wears a golden five-petalled buddha-crown, earrings, a necklace, arm-, wrist- and ankle-bands, and a red robe with golden dots, and Samantabhadrī (now having a blue body) wears a golden hairpin, earrings, and armbands. With these accoutrements, they lose their dharmakāya body and attain a sambhogakāya-peaceful-deity body. Does this replacement of the *formless* (garment-less) body with the *form-* (garment-) body of Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī share the same purpose as the replacement of the *fruitional* (three-face) body with the *causal body* (one-face) of Mahottora Heruka? Does the lama intend to create a program where the practitioner starts by visualizing the garment-body of Samantabhadra with the support of the thangka and eventually discards the support and realizes a garment-less, naked body when the practice ends? I do not have a certain answer. But since Samantabhadra and Mahottara are the two most important, leading deities in the maṇḍala, to which the makers pay the most heightened attention, it is certain that their idiosyncratic forms do not result from a mistake of the artist misrepresenting a canonical form. Rather, they are intentional decisions by the lama and the artist to create an individualized gradual path for the practitioners.

Second, the meditative program the makers create is rigorous and challenging, evident from the unique rendering of the six sages. In other bardo paintings we have discussed in Chapter 2 (Fig. 14, for example), the sages of the six realms appear in a uniform human form, distinguished only by their body colors and the instruments they hold: the sage of the god realm (Indraśakra) with a white body playing a lute, the sage of the demigod realm (Vemacitra) with a green body bearing armor and weapon, the sage of the human realm (Śākyamuni) with a yellow body carrying a mendicant's staff, the sage of the animal realm (Sthirasiṃha) with a blue body carrying a book, the sage of the anguished spirits realm (Jvālamukha) with a red body carrying a wish-granting casket, and the sage of the hell beings (Yāma

[140] Francesca Fremantle, 177.

Dharmarāja) with a black body carrying a flame and water. In contrast, in the peaceful maṇḍala of the *Colored Dots*, the artist retains all the instruments that the six sages hold while replacing their human bodies with bodies corresponding to beings in their respective realm. Indraśakra appears as a god with silk and headdress; Vemacitra appears as an anti-god with a military uniform from head to toe; Śākyamuni retains his human body; Sthirasiṃha appears as an animal with a lion head; Jvālamukha appears as an anguished spirit with characteristic flaming hair; Yāma Dharmarāja appears as a hell-being with a terrifying bull-head associated with the king of the hell realm.

It is possible that these rare forms of the six sages are the artist's innovation. Since there are no ready-made designs, their method is to borrow the shape and measurement of a similar class of deity and apply them by analogy to these new forms. For example, when sketching Sthirasiṃha, the sage of the animal realm, the artist first borrows the body proportion of short wrathful deities including the short body length (which is noticeably shorter compared to his neighbor Sakyamuni), large head, wide, long torso, short legs, a big belly swinging to his left, right leg bending, and left leg straight extending towards the left (Fig. 18). They then add wrathful ornaments—such as the human skins hanging around his back, tiger-skin loincloth, and necklaces of human heads. Finally, they replace the arm posture and head with the characters of Sthirasiṃha—two arms bending in holding a book and a lion head in profile view. The appearance of animal-form Sthirasiṃha is thus not an entirely new invention but a hybrid combining the iconography and iconometry of wrathful deities established in the artistic tradition and iconography of the sage of the animal realm. Similar things could be said to all other sages, all of whom display new attributes inferred by the artist yet are not without references in the artistic tradition. The body of Yāma Dharmarāja is borrowed from images of Īśvarīs (depicted in the outer ring of the wrathful maṇḍala); that of Sthirasiṃha is possibly derived from yoginis; and those of Sakra and Vemacitra are derived from humans.

The making of these innovative forms probably follows the lama's special instruction. While the *Habitual Tendencies* does not specify their bodies, in *The Practice of Vajrakilaya*, Khenpo Namdrol Rinpoche, one of the leading teachers in Nyingma tantras, articulates that six sages in the Nyingma

tradition manifest as the king of each realm. He also addresses the discrepancy between the actual form and the popular artistic representation:

> In terms of practice, we generally visualize all of these six [sages'] emanations in a pleasing form similar to the Buddha Sakyamuni, since this is what we are accustomed to as human beings. This is why thangka painters generally represent them in this manner, rather than in the forms that they actually adopt and appear in to the beings of each realm, for instance as a hell being [king Yāmantaka] in the hells. [However,] when we meditate on the assembly of the one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities, these six buddhas appear within that maṇḍala as nirmāṇakāya buddhas, in human form…They [the sages] appear in accordance with the perspectives and dispositions of the beings needing to be tamed.[141]

The last line explains why the six sages adopt two different forms. Since the six sages' original role is to benefit beings of each realm—dispensing teachings to release them from suffering—they *actually* appear in accordance with these beings' perspectives, whether as a god, human, animal, ghost, or hell-being. Also, since the six sages' role in the sādhana practice is to benefit the meditator—a human being—they *pleasingly* appear in the human form that humans are most accustomed to. The lama responsible for the *Colored Dots* program appears to agree with Khenpo Namdrol Rinpoche's former point, but to reject his latter point. By instructing the painter to represent six sages in the *actual* form rather than the *pleasing* form, we can imagine that he argues that his student, the meditator, does not need *pleasing*, familiar forms that best appeal to them—but rather requires the *actual* appearances, even though they might be unwelcoming and challenging to them at first. Thus, although the practitioner would not expect a sage with a lion head and wearing a tiger loincloth, they are challenged to dissolve this unfamiliarity and discomfort and *see* the real appearance of the six sages inherent in their mind and body.

Third, the addition of fourteen colored dots to the peaceful maṇḍala add another layer of visualization during the practice. These five-colored dots of blue, white, yellow, red, and green, each emanating golden rays, probably represent five lights in one's subtle body—a theme that receives substantial treatment in the Karling liturgy. For example, the *Hearing* teaches the bardo-being that they should expect both deities and lights in the bardo of reality:

> O, Child of Buddha Nature, should you have moved on, [without recognition of the clear light in the bardo of dying], after having been unconscious for [up to] three and a half days, you will

[141] Khenpo Namdrol Rinpoche, *The Practice of Vajrakilaya* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1999), 38-39.

> awaken from unconsciousness and wonder, "What has happened to me?' So, recognise this to be the intermediate state [of reality]! At this time, the aspects of the cycles of existence are reversed [into their own true nature] and all phenomena are arising as lights and buddha-bodies.[142]

The *Habitual Tendencies* similarly teaches the meditator that lights are present within their heart and crown, embodying the peaceful and wrathful deities.

> OṂ ĀH HŪṂ
> At this time when we dwell within the intermediate state of living,
> The forty-two assembled peaceful deities,
> Are radiantly present within the celestial palace of our own hearts,
> Embodied in the form of a cluster of five-coloured lights.
> Yet, as soon as we die and begin to transmigrate,
> This assembly of peaceful deities will emerge from our hearts,
> And fill the space before us.[143]

> OṂ ĀH HŪṂ
> At this time when we dwell within the intermediate state of living,
> The assembly of the sixty blood-drinking deities
> Is radiantly present within the celestial palace of the skull, at the crown-centre, within one's brain,
> Embodied in the form of a cluster of five-coloured lights.
> Yet, as soon as we die and begin to transmigrate,
> This assembly of blood-drinking deities will emerge from the brain,
> And appear [before us], filling the entire trichiliocosm.[144]

Furthermore, these five lights merge with a wide range of fivefold schemata that manifest from rigpa. They include the five Buddha families (Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi), the five psycho-physical aggregates (consciousness, form, feeling, perception, and karmic tendencies), the five elements (space, water, earth, fire, and air), and the five pristine cognitions or primordial wisdoms (the pristine cognition of reality's expanse, mirror-like cognition, cognition of sameness, discernment, and accomplishment).[145] In their purified form, all these fivefold structures are embodied within the luminosities. As manifestations of rigpa, they serve as the elemental expression of the hundred deities, which remain latent throughout one's lifetime and only emerge in concrete forms—such as deities and maṇḍalas—on special occasions, either during the bardo of reality or within meditative sessions that reference its visionary sequences. The inclusion of the five luminosities adds another

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[142] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 236.
[143] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 75.
[144] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 87.
[145] His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, "Introductory Commentary," xxv.

dimension to the visualization process. Rather than directly visualizing deities arising from the maṇḍala, the practitioner may first perceive a maṇḍala of lights, from which peaceful deities then emerge. Also, the inscriptions on the bottom right blue light—though not clearly discernible (are they seed syllables?)—suggest an intermediate step of engaging with the light itself.

This interpretation, however, meets many problems. If the deities emanate from the lights, how can there be fourteen light spheres and fifteen groups (circles) of deities? If the lama follows these descriptions—which teaches that lights are present in one's crown and heart, why do the light spheres only appear in the peaceful maṇḍala but not the wrathful one? Most importantly, why does the lama emphasize the presence of light—a decision not found in other bardo meditative programs?

The exact answers to these questions require future research. What I can do is to merely point out some connections between these lights in the *Colored Dots* program and other meditative programs that place huge emphasis on light spheres. One example is the fifteenth-century Karling manuscript that contains a page of five colored dots with inscriptions on the back (Fig. 4). The Rubin Museum describes them as "five cosmogenic elements" that "serve as a mnemonic symbol of the five elements that constitute our psychophysical individuality: earth (yellow), water (white), fire (red), air (green), and space or quintessence (blue)."[146] Since the "five cosmogenic elements" are associated with the bardo of dying, in which the elements dissolve prior to the experience of the clear light, could the dots provide a path for the practitioner to reference the dying process and experience the clear light? Further, in the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*, the distribution of colored dots does not form a symmetrical pattern, consisting of three blue, three white, two yellow, two red, and four green dots. Could this irregular arrangement reflect the practitioner's unique "psychophysical individuality" as understood by the lama? Rather than representing universal luminosities present in all beings, could the dots instead signify specific elemental

[146] "Five Cosmogenic Elements; Text and Illuminations of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of the Intermediate State (Bardo)," Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art, accessed March 25, 2025, https://rubinmuseum.org/collection/f1998-16-5-2/?relatedview=spiral

configurations—earth, water, fire, air, and space—corresponding to the practitioner's subtle body and tailored for an individualized spiritual path?

The other example is the Dzogchen mural at Lukhang. While colored light spheres rarely appear in Tibetan paintings, the first section of the Lukhang north wall contains over fifty light spheres, as related to Dzogchen philosophy and practice (Fig. 16c). Jacob Winkler points out the source text behind the mural, "The Great Perfection, the Gathering of Samantabhadra's Intention" (*Rdzogs chen kun bzang dgongs' dus*), and argues that, based on the text, the fivefold lights represent the five primordial wisdoms as the fivefold manifestations of rigpa:

> The primordial awareness of dharmadhatu [reality's expanse] abides as dark blue, the mirror-like primordial awareness as white, the primordial awareness of equanimity as yellow, the discriminating primordial awareness as red and the all-accomplishing primordial awareness as green. All five appear as friends of the sun in the centre.[147]

The sun is always *luminous* itself, and the reason one does not see its light is because of the obscuring clouds. Here, the sun is a metaphor of always-*illuminating* rigpa undisturbed by obscuring ignorance, and the fivefold lights, as the "friends of the sun," refer to the *illuminating* wisdoms that are closely associated with rigpa. Thus, for a Dzogchen practitioner, to realize these light-wisdoms is an indispensable intermediate step towards realizing rigpa. Further, this practice of seeing the light is distinct from other classes of practice in its focus on the *luminosity* aspect of rigpa, as Ian Baker quotes from a wall inscription:

> Through the unmediated perception of reality, conceptual analysis naturally subsides…Free of conflicting views, all things arise as intrinsic luminosity…As tainted aggregates dissolve, the body itself is naturally enlightened (illuminated)![148]

Therefore, based on the teachings from the Lukhang, it is possible that the *Colored Dots* program similarly emphasizes on the soteriological power of the intrinsic *luminosities* of one's body—whose essence are five primordial wisdoms.

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[147] Winkler, "The rDzogs Chen Murals," 334.
[148] Baker, "Moving towards Perfection," 419.

Further, this realization of intrinsic *luminosity* could be reached through a variety of techniques, as instructed by the mural. In the first section of the north wall, the light spheres are in diverse contexts. They either appear individually or in groups—composed in a row, chained together, or combined in a maṇḍala. Also, some are situated above practitioners' heads, and others are located within practitioners' bodies. Let's take three examples to show the diverse ways of interacting with lights. First, there are two rows of six identical light spheres on the top (Fig. 16d). Based on the inscriptions, the top row represents the "five families of pure wisdom," while the bottom row represents the "six lights of impure perceptions." Vertical beams of light emanate from each of the bottom light spheres toward the top—which instruct the practice of transforming one's impure perceptions into pure. Second, below these two rows of lights, slightly to the right, is a seated meditating yogin topped by a chain of seven light spheres (Fig. 16e). Based on the inscriptions, these light spheres are bindu (drops, seminal points) in the subtle body, and the yogin is manipulating these elements by externalizing the drops and "connecting them in a serial order." Third, in the left middle section, a row of five seated yogins is emanating a row of five-colored lights on top of their crown (Fig. 16f). Each colored light is associated with a tathāgata located in an additional row on the top—red for Amitābha, blue for Akṣobhya, white for Vairochana, orange for Ratnasambhava, and green for Amoghasiddhi.[149] According to Christian Luczanits, these yogins are establishing their bodies as palaces of five tathāgatas.[150]

Evident from these examples, there could be a variety of intentions behind the lama's addition of these light spheres to the *Colored Dots* program. It could be that the lama knows that his student has had previous experiences in the Dzogchen light-sphere-type practices—such as ones outlined in the mural—and the lama thus designs a practice that would be more efficient for the practitioner. It could also be that the lama thinks that the *luminosity* of rigpa is an aspect the student should particularly cultivate. Further, it could also be that the lama intends to create a path referencing the five elements encountered in the

[149] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 388-389.
[150] Luczanits, Christian. 2011. "Locating Great Perfection: The Murals of the Lhasa Lukhang." *Orientations* 42, no. 2 (March): 108.

bardo of dying, in addition to the path visualizing the *zhi-khro* deities in the bardo of reality. In either case, the makers' addition of these fourteen colored dots creates an individualized program for the practitioner's best benefit.

In general, these idiosyncratic iconographic details, including the rendering of Mahottara Heruka, Samantabhadra, and six sages and the special features of the dots, are by no means arbitrary but tailored based on the individual's current spiritual capacities, previous experience, and future goals as understood by the lama. The makers thus establish a unique path for the practitioners—a path not found in other bardo-*zhi-khro* painting programs.

Result

The *Colored Dots* is essentially the practitioner's portrait, and once they realize that—reaching a full, heart-felt, and unwavering identification with the thangka—they reach Buddhahood, that is, the *result* of the meditative program. For the makers, the practitioner is the sole subject matter. Depicting deities, maṇḍalas, human teachers, or landscapes is secondary compared to the foremost goal of creating an idealized version of the practitioner's body as a reference for their practice. The two maṇḍalas represent the practitioner's subtle body—crown and heart—in the sacred, primordial, and *real* form. The deities and light spheres within the maṇḍalas represent elements in the body: their idiosyncratic appearances show that the thangka is not a picture of any individual endowed with buddha-nature, but an imprint of this specific practitioner whose body (and its potential) is understood as such by the makers. The landscape and lineage figures are also part of the sacred body. The landscape establishes the body's context, whose function is to exclude any references to mundane experiences. The linage figures represent the idealized body's alternative manifestations, as lineage figures have obtained this sacred body as part of their transmitted knowledge.

For the practitioners, looking at the *Colored Dots* is looking into a magical mirror which illuminates their *real* body—in the form of maṇḍalas of deities—always present but obscured during mundane experience. At the outset of the path, through experiencing the deities arising from the mirror in front of them, the meditator also experiences them arising out of their subtle body corresponding to the

mirror. Then, through repeatedly looking into this mirror and identifying themselves with scenes in the mirror throughout their lifetime, they fully recognize their embodied sacredness, rigpa, and bring it to reality, thereby achieving the *result*. The ultimate realization comes when the practitioner feels that they no longer need an external object—a painting or a mirror—as a support of visualization, as the Karling philosophical text *Introduction to Awareness* teaches:

> Though there is a vast plethora of discordant meditations,
> Within this intrinsic awareness,
> Which penetrates ordinary consciousness to the core,
> There is no duality between the object of meditation and the meditator.
> Without meditating on the object of meditation, search for the meditator!
> Though one searches for this meditator, none will be found.
> So, at that instant, one will be brought to the exhaustion point of meditation.
> At that very moment, one will encounter the innermost boundary of meditation.[151]

At the point of realization, the distinction between the painting and meditator dissolves. The deities are no longer present as an external sacred power embodied in the painting but internally residing within their body and mind. The *Colored Dots* is no longer perceived as an *other*, a meditative support, a soteriological tool, or a *path* towards a goal—but becomes indistinguishable from the practitioner. The meditation program ends here, as the presence of the meditator and the *Colored Dots* transforms into the presence of ultimate, non-differentiable, and sign-less rigpa.

[151] Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 49.

Conclusion

Through an exploration of the soteriological programs embedded in seven bardo paintings—with the particular focus on a nineteenth-century thangka titled the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*—this thesis proposes a new approach to viewing bardo paintings, and Tibetan esoteric paintings more broadly. When the scroll unfurls, what emerges is not simply a field of deities encoding fixed esoteric knowledge, but a *living site* that bears witness to the dynamic relationships among the lama, artist, and commissioners (whether viewers, recipients, or practitioners). These relationships culminate in transformation: the donor's accumulation of merit, the recipient's empowerment for the afterlife journey, the practitioner's realization of Buddhahood, and more.

This thesis offers three key contributions to the field of Tibetan art history. First, Chapters 2 and 3 challenge the common assumption that all maṇḍalas function as meditation aids. Chapter 2 identifies six distinct functions that bardo paintings may serve, while Chapter 3 presents a sustained argument for why the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala* specifically functions as a meditative aid. Together, these chapters demonstrate the importance of substantiating claims about function with careful visual and contextual evidence, rather than relying on generalizations. Second, the thesis critiques the conventional art-historical tendency to privilege textual sources over visual materials. By shifting the focus back to the paintings themselves, it offers an alternative approach—one with important implications for how museums, catalogues, and curators might interpret bardo paintings going forward. Third, the thesis adopts an indigenous framework, drawing on the Dzogchen model of ground, path, and result to analyze the interaction between makers and practitioners. This methodology not only honors the Tibetan Buddhist view of art as an active agent of transformation, but also demonstrates how Buddhist philosophical systems can productively inform the study of Buddhist art. This approach, I suggest, offers a productive model for future interdisciplinary research.

At the same time, the thesis has several limitations. First, I have not received initiations into the specific teachings discussed and have not had the opportunity to consult directly with lineage holders; as such, my interpretations remain preliminary and open to critique. Second, I have been unable to view

many of the paintings in person and have had to rely on photographic reproductions from books and online databases. As a result, my analyses often emphasize formal qualities while overlooking the material dimensions of the works—the condition and wear, silk mountings, pigments, scent, reverse inscriptions, consecration rituals, and more.

In future work on Tibetan, Himalayan, and Esoteric Buddhist art, I hope to address these limitations by seeking initiations and direct engagement with lineage holders when exploring the ritual use of art, and by encountering the artworks in person to better understand their presence, power, and memory. I will continue to work at the intersection of art history and religious studies, guided by indigenous frameworks, to explore how these images are not merely artistic representations, but also vibrant sites of encounter—stories of the lamas, artists, practitioners, and deities.

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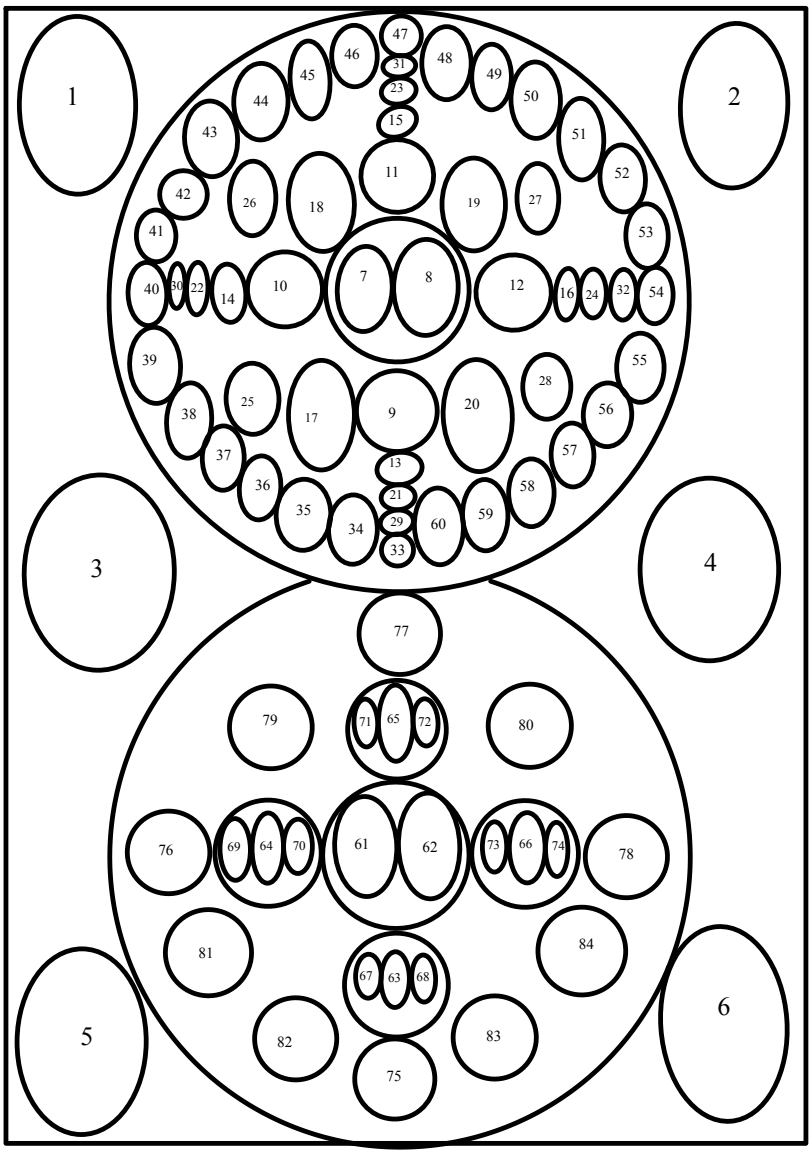
Fig 1. *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*. 61.50 x 43cm. Tibet, Tsang Province; 19th century. Ground Mineral Pigment on Cotton. The Jucker Collection. HAR no. 89182.

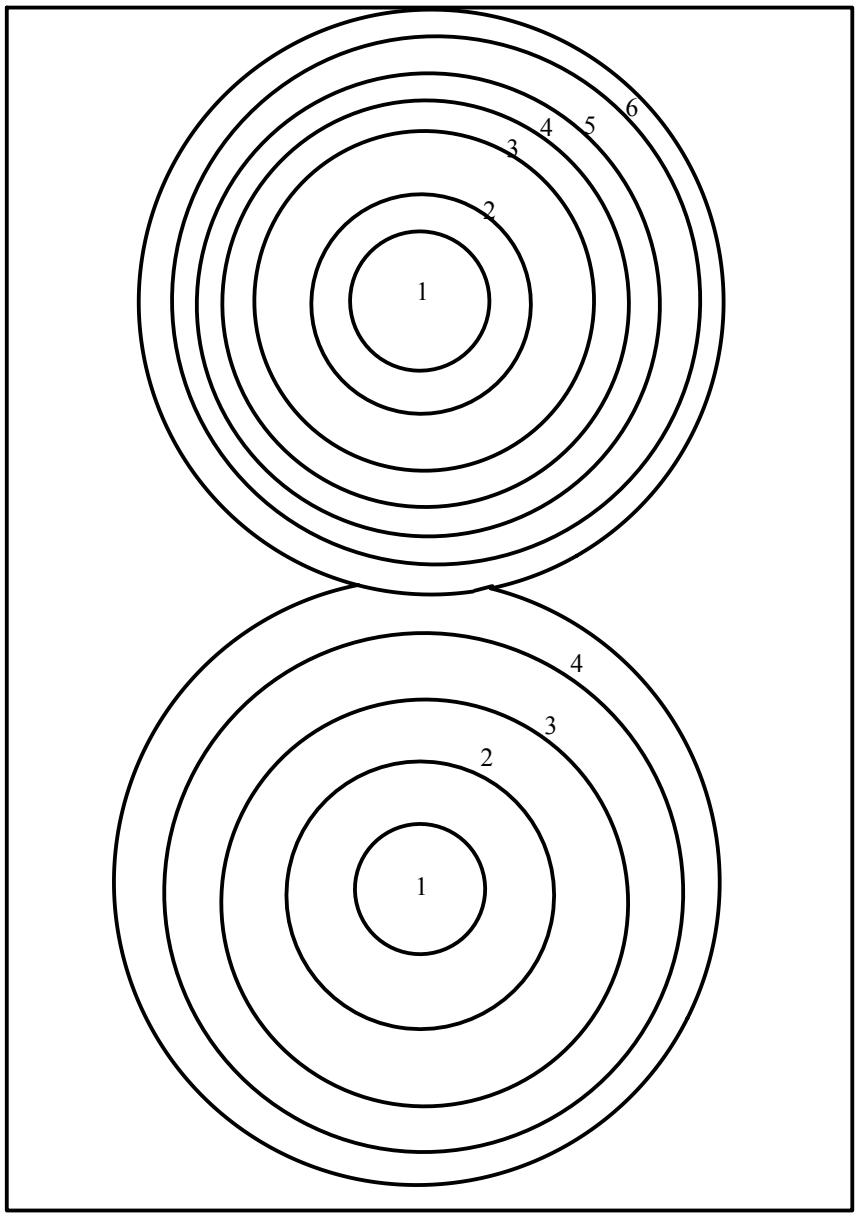


1. Padmasambhava
2. Amitābha
3. A historical Sakya lama (unidentified)
4. Akṣobhya
5. Ekajaṭī
6. A contemporary Nyingma lama (unidentified)
7. Mahottara Heruka and Krodhéśvarī (yab-yum)
8. Buddha Heruka and Buddhakrodheśvarī (yab-yum)
9. Vajra Heruka and Vajrakrodheśvarī (yab-yum)
10. Ratna Heruka and Ratnakrodheśvarī (yab-yum)
11. Padma Heruka and Padmakrodheśvarī (yab-yum)
12. Karma Heruka and Karmakrodheśvarī (yab-yum)
13. Gaurī
14. Caurī
15. Pramohā
16. Vetālī
17. Pukkasī
18. Ghasmarī
19. Caṇḍālī
20. Śmaśānī
21. Siṁhamukhī
22. Vyāghramukhī
23. Śṛgālamukhī
24. Śvanamukhī
25. Gṛdhramukhī
26. Kāṅkamukhī
27. Kākamukhī
28. Ūlūkamukhī
29. Vajratejasī
30. Vajramoghā
31. Vajralokā
32. Vajravetalī

33- 60. Twenty-eight Īśvarī

61. Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī (yab-yum)
62. Akṣobhya-Vajrasattva and Buddhalocanā (yab-yum)
63. Vairocana and Ākāśadhātvīśvarī (yab-yum)
64. Ratnasambhava and Māmakī (yab-yum)
65. Amitābha and Paṇḍaravāsinī (yab-yum)
66. Amoghasiddhi and Samayatārā (yab-yum)
67. Kṣitigarbha and Lāsyā (yab-yum)
68. Maitreya and Puṣpā (yab-yum)
69. Samantabhadra and Mālya (yab-yum)
70. Ākāśagarbha and Dhūpa (yab-yum)
71. Avalokiteśvara and Gītā (yab-yum)
72. Mañjuśrīkumāra-bhūta and Āloka (yab-yum)
73. Nivāraṇaviśkambhin and Gandhā (yab-yum)
74. Vajrapāṇi and Nartī (yab-yum)
75. Trailokyavijayana and Aṅkuśā (yab-yum)
76. Yamantaka and Pāśā (yab-yum)
77. Hayagrīva and Sphoṭā (yab-yum)
78. Amṛtakuṇḍalin and Ghaṇṭā (yab-yum)
79. Indraśakra
80. Vemacitra
81. Śākyamuni
82. Sthirasiṃha
83. Jvālamukha
84. Yama Dharmarāja

Fig 2. Diagram of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*, with labeled identification of each figure. Diagram and label provided by the author.



Wrathful Mandala:

1. Mahottara Heruka and Krodhéśvarī, Buddha Heruka and Buddhakrodheśvarī
2. Four pairs of herukas
3. Eight Mātaraḥ
4. Eight Piśācī
5. Four female gatekeepers
6. Twenty-eight Īśvarī

Peaceful Mandala:

1. Sāmantabhadra and Sāmantabhadrī, Akṣobhya-Vajrasattva and Buddhalocanā.
2. Four buddha families
3. Six sages
4. Four pairs of gatekeepers

Fig 3. Diagram of the *Colored Dots Maṇḍala*, with labeled identification of each group of deities. Diagram and label provided by the author.

Fig 4. Bardo manuscript.
18 pages with images on the one side and text on the other. 70.49 x 30.48 cm. Tibet; 15th century. Rubin Museum of Art. HAR no. 778.

Fig 5. Karling tsakalis.
24 initiation cards, with the portrait of Karma Lingpa in the first row, second to the right. 50.80 x 68.58 cm. Tibet; 15th century. Rubin Museum of Art. HAR no. 289.

Fig 6. *Mahottara Heruka and Wrathful Deities*, with Karma Lingpa on the left of the top row. 66.36 x 47.63 cm. Tibet; 18th century. Inscriptions next to each figure. Rubin Museum of Art. HAR no. 194.

Fig 7. *Vajrasattva and Peaceful Deities.* Tibet, Ü Province; 18th century. Image from Giuseppe Tucci, Tibetan Painted Scrolls.

Fig 8. *Vajrasattva and Bardo Scenes*. Tibet; 18th century or later. Rubin Museum of Art. HAR no. 65860.

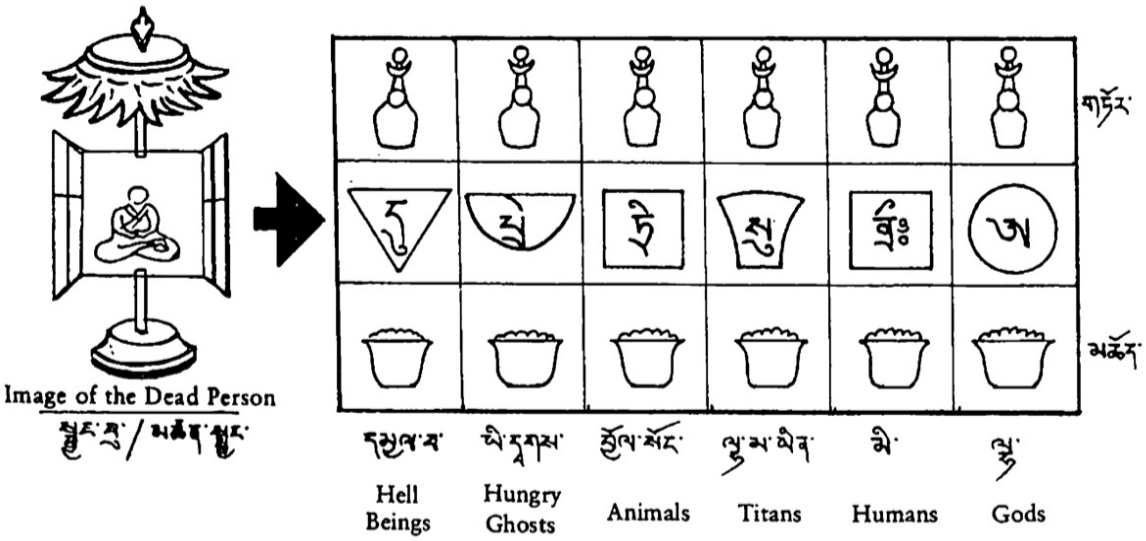


Fig 9. Ritual plan for the ritual of purifying the deceased out of the six realms of existence. Diagram by Detlef Ingo Lauf in the *Secret Doctrines of the Tibetan Books of the Dead*.

Fig 10. Ngakpas in the Karling *Zhi-ḳhro* rituals. Rebkong; 2017. Photograph by Georgios T. Halkias in the "One Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Observations on an Annual Ceremony by the Ngakpas of Rebkong."

Fig 11a. *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala*. 71.12 x 45.72cm. Ground mineral pigment and fine gold line on cotton. Tibet, Ü Province; 18th century. Rubin Museum of Art, New York. HAR no. 557.

Fig 11b. *Standard Bardo Maṇḍala*. Reverse side, including “OṂ ĀH HŪṂ” inscriptions, prayers, and handprint.

Fig 12a. Thangka in standard five-mandala composition. Bhutan; 19th century. Private. HAR no. 203524.

Fig 12b. Thangka in standard five-mandala composition. Tibet;19th century. Private. HAR no. 4496.

Fig 12c. Thangka in standard five-mandala composition. 101.60 x 71.12 cm. Tibet; 19th century. Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University. HAR no. 88611.

Fig 12d. Thangka in standard five-mandala composition. Inscriptions next to each figure. Tibet; 19th century. Rubin Museum of Art. HAR no. 1015.

Fig 13a. Chenrezik Lhakhang mural, depicting scenes from three bardo stages. Chenrezik Lhakhang, Ladakh. Photography by Kaya Dorjay Angdus.

Fig 13b. Detail of the mural, showing Vairocana in yab-yum with Ākāśadhātvīśvarī at the top and a naked bardo-being below. Photography by Kaya Dorjay Angdus.

Fig 14. *Jatsön Nyingpo and Bardo Maṇḍala*. 66 x 54 cm. Tibet; 17th century. Collection of Ravi Kumar. HAR no. 99692.

Fig 15. Clay figures of the peaceful deities on a *zhi-khro* maṇḍala. Photograph by Peter Nebel. Image from Martin Brauen, *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism*.

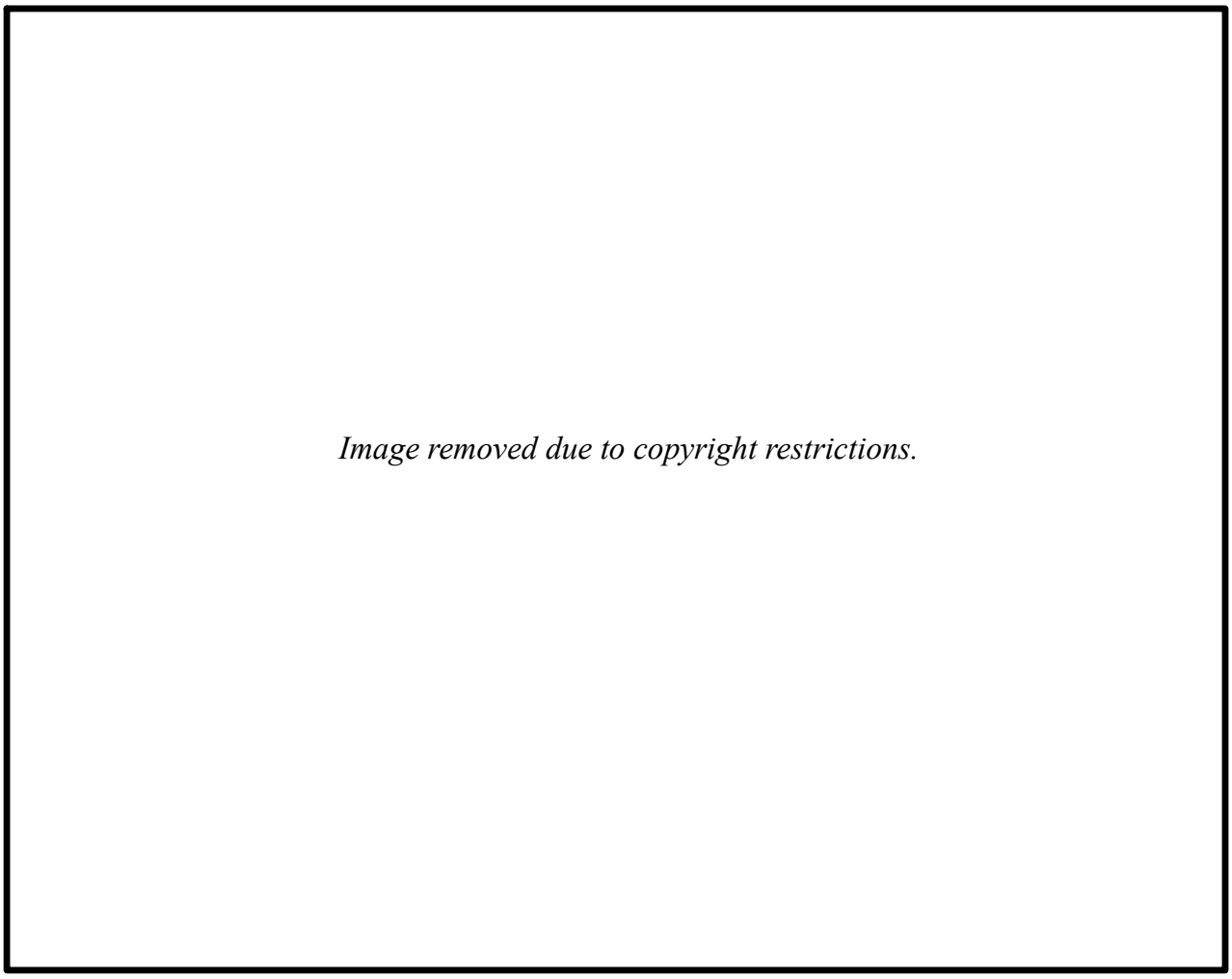


Fig 16a. Lukhang Mural, detail of the second of five sections from northern wall depicting the cycle of life: incarnation, gestation, life, death, bardo, and rebirth. Lukhang, Lhasa; 17th century or later. Photograph by © Thomas Laird, 2018. TASCHEN, Murals of Tibet. https://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/lukhang-murals/

Fig 16b. Lukhang Mural, detail of the northern wall depicting paintings and sculptures of peaceful and wrathful deities. Photograph by © Thomas Laird, 2018. TASCHEN, Murals of Tibet.

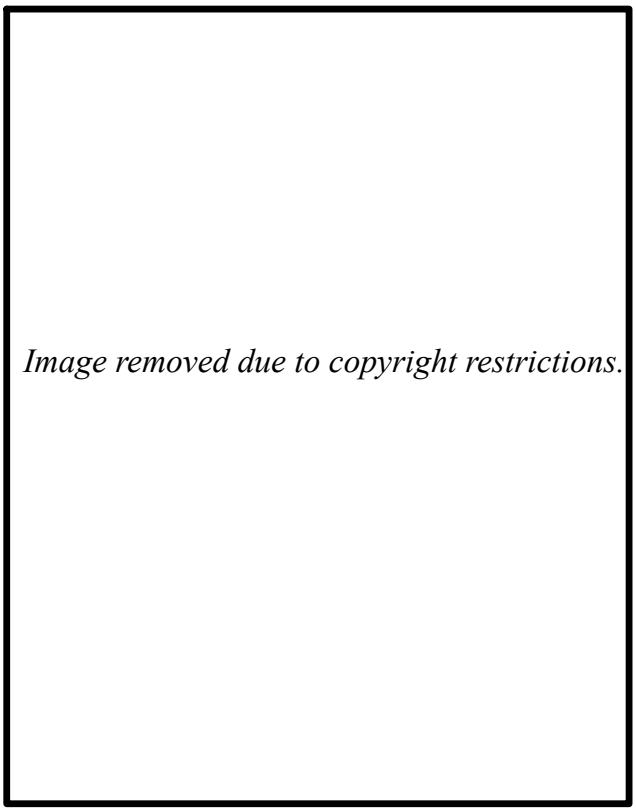


Fig 16c. Lukhang Mural, detail of the first section of the northern wall depicting yogis, deities, and light spheres. Photograph by © Thomas Laird, 2018. TASCHEN, Murals of Tibet.

Fig 16d. Lukhang Mural, detail of the first section northern wall.

Fig 16e. Lukhang Mural, detail of the first section northern wall.

Fig 16f. Lukhang Mural, detail of the first section northern wall.

Fig 17. *The First Panchen in a Set Depicting His Previous Lives*. 70.2 x 39.1 cm. Tibet, Tsang Province; mid- or late 18th century. Rubin Museum of Art. HAR 477.

Fig 18a. Vajrakila. *Cha tshad kyi dpe ris Dpyod Idan yid gsos* (*Illustrations of Measurements: A Refresher for the Cognoscenti*) edited by Desi Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705) in ca. 1687. Image from the *Handbook of Tibetan Iconometry: A Guide to the Arts of the 17th Century*.

Fig 18b. Vajrapani, *bhutadamara*. *Cha tshad kyi dpe ris Dpyod Idan yid gsos* (*Illustrations of Measurements: A Refresher for the Cognoscenti*) edited by Desi Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705) in ca. 1687. Image from the *Handbook of Tibetan Iconometry: A Guide to the Arts of the 17th Century*.