

THE
SECOND BUDDHA

MASTER
OF
TIME

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Padmasambhava, Central Tibet, possibly Bhutan, 18th century, pigments on cloth, 68% × 39¼ inches (174.9 × 99.7 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin, C2006.66.4 (HAR 12)

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Padmasambhava, Tibet, 15th century, silver, gilt copper alloy with inlays of turquoise and coral, 6½ × 4¾ × 3¾ inches (16.5 × 12.1 × 9.5 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, C2005.16.36 (HAR 65459)

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**THE GURU
BEYOND TIME
PADMASAMBHAVA'S
EIGHT NAMES
AND THREE EXALTED
BODIES**

There are several approaches to framing who Padmasambhava may have been, but a more relevant question from the traditional perspective may be what is “he”? To begin, it is clear that Padmasambhava’s status as a real historical person is fundamental to his stature among Tibetans: myth alone does not suffice. As an eighth-century master of tantric esoterica, he is credited with successfully converting the diverse powers inhabiting Tibet’s awesome natural landscape, “the environment and its inhabitants,” Tibet and the Tibetans, to Buddhism. He is portrayed as a uniquely accomplished human being who, having accepted an imperial invitation at the apex of the empire, first trekked from Nepal onto the Tibetan plateau around twelve centuries ago. However, from a critical historical perspective, the textual record challenges these claims to his having such a catalytic role, since he is scarcely mentioned among extant sources from his era. Padmasambhava’s persona evolved in the centuries after the empire collapsed (c. 842) but burgeoned later in the “treasure” literature, texts said to have been concealed in his time and extracted centuries later. It is in this later period when the first complete biography of Padmasambhava was compiled by Nyangrel Nyima Özer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*; 1124–1192), who is revered as the first of the great Buddhist treasure revealers.

The thirteenth-century scroll painting of Padmasambhava, flanked by his two consorts (figure 3.1), may be the earliest extant image of the Second Buddha. It already presents his most common guise; therefore, it appears that his iconography has been remarkably consistent from its earliest iterations. While this painting does not have inscriptions, the figure at lower left is assumed to be Nyangrel.

It is from Nyangrel’s era and text that Padmasambhava, like clear light passing through a crystal, moves from the brilliant potential of



Figure 3.1

a nearly invisible figure, through the creative matrixes of Tibetan minds reimagining the imperium as a golden age, to emerge refracted into a spectrum of iconographical forms, with his elaboration in eight “names” and three bodies foremost among them.

Before Nyangrel’s twelfth-century revelation, references to this mysterious figure were scattered among a smattering of old manuscripts, though it seems likely that he persisted as a popular subject of oral lore and as the ascribed source of didactic songs on esoteric topics. None of these textual sources describes his interactions with the emperor nor his role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet.¹ Instead, he is presented as an extraordinarily accomplished and potent master of Buddhist *tantra* who was active in the region. It must be conceded that the Padmasambhava of history, the actual human being, is mostly lost to time, but his past remains fundamental not only to whoever he may have been but also to who he is today. The assumption of this historicity defines him and reflects how he is known to Tibetans in the present. And yet in many respects, the historical Padmasambhava is the least of him. Tibetan Buddhists value not only Padmasambhava’s historical persona but also his cultural and religious significance—what Padmasambhava truly is, primordially and eternally.

From the Buddhist perspective of our relative world, he is understood within the three times of the past, present, and future, within history, persistence, and prophecy, but his ultimate essence transcends time: he is the lotus-born guru beyond time. As the Second Buddha rivaled only by the first one, Buddha Śākyamuni himself, Padmasambhava was a man, a symbol of human potential fully realized, and the very essence of enlightenment itself. This threefold division reflects a renowned rubric emphasized and elaborated in later Buddhisms, the three exalted “bodies” of the Buddha (*kāya; sku*).² In general, each fully enlightened buddha is said to possess each of these three bodies. While ultimately inseparable, their division represents a progressive emergence from the subtlest state of awakening, ultimate reality itself, into coarser states perceptible to less realized beings. The “truth body” (*dharmakāya; chos sku*) of the buddha is the subtlest, where body in this sense only indicates a vast expanse of non-dual awareness: as ultimate reality beyond any appearance or conceptual thought, it is the final truth of every external and internal phenomenon. Alpha-pure and primordially awakened, the truth body pervades everything without exception or limit. Despite constant accessibility and total presence as the very essence of every moment of experience, it remains unknown by the unenlightened.

The “complete enjoyment body” (*sambhogakāya; longs sku*) is the emergence of that nonmanifest ultimate into a luminously apparent form, still much too subtle to be perceived by ignorant beings but accessible to those who have deepened their insight into the nature of reality, gained high degrees of stability in meditation, and refined their conduct from self-interest toward the service of others. The enjoyment body is often encountered as a buddha abiding in its own pure realm, which is accessed foremost (but not exclusively) via devotional visualization, usually in meditative retreat. At some point in practice the contrivance of deliberate concentration on a mental object may be released, and a vision of the buddha realm dynamically dawns, hyper-lucid and ultra-real, beyond any sense of ordinary

Figure 3.1 Padmasambhava, Tibet, 13th century, pigments on cloth, 19 × 14½ inches (48.3 × 36.6 cm), Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection, New York (HAR 160)

imaginative experience. Thus one enjoys a realm completely beyond the sufferings of *samsāra*, or cyclic existence, this painful realm of birth and death, rebirth, and redeath, even while still tethered to it by a karmically driven life.

Finally, the “magically emanated body” (*nirṃaṇakāya*; *sprul sku*) is the only buddha body that is apparent in this world to ordinary beings. This term is used for Buddha Śākyamuni, the Second Buddha Padmasambhava, and any other enlightened being tangibly encountered. In fact, it is used to refer to all reincarnate teachers in Tibetan Buddhism: they are called *tülku*, the magical emanation bodies of buddhas. Although meeting such buddhas in person with the opportunity to receive their blessing and instruction is considered supreme, even an encounter with their representation in art is auspicious. Such encounters are the product of countless virtuous deeds in the past, an inspiration for the accumulation of positive karma in the present, and, with that merit, the eventual accomplishment of the path in the future. It is said that anyone can attain enlightenment. Everyone possesses the seed of awakening—the buddha nature—as true essence, but the conditions within one’s life strongly influence the immediacy of its possibility. In places without even an image of a buddha, never mind the Buddhist teachings, how could enlightenment be possible? In sum, all coarse representations of a buddha’s form, meaning those encountered in cyclic existence, are the magically emanated bodies of the buddhas and, as such, are endowed with blessings.

In this view, the countless texts that mention Padmasambhava from the twelfth century, as well as the many artistic representations of him emerging not long thereafter, function as vehicles for his essence for those who have yet to realize it. The ultimate aspect of his person is made accessible, even if driven by the karmic machinations of mundane experience. For those trapped in cyclic existence, encountering Padmasambhava in his textual and visual forms serves as the path to his ultimate nature, which is no different from our own. This is one reason why these artistic forms have been celebrated throughout all but the earliest centuries of Buddhism and reached such an apogee in Tibet.

Even if the Padmasambhava of the past is mostly lost to time, his person continues to resonate and radiate in the present by means of his vibrant biographical literature and the range of his iconographical forms. While there can be no doubt that his many portraits are drawn from the stories of his life in lore, song, and text, a process of mutual exchange became symbiotic over the centuries; where his names in text offered a foundation for his depiction in art, his iconographical elaboration came to inform and inspire the elements, episodes, and appellations of his biographies. As occurs with the biographies of the Buddha Śākyamuni as well,³ text and image function as a deeply interrelated cooperative where one or the other alone tells less than half the story.

Padmasambhava’s earliest, complete, autonomous biographies remain the most influential. These include three treasure texts from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries: the *Copper Island* biography by Nyangrel Nyima Özer; the *Crystal Cave* by Orgyen Lingpa (o rgyan gling pa; b. 1323), in verse; and the *Golden Garland* by Sanggyé Lingpa (sangs rgyas gling pa; 1340–1396), mostly in prose.⁴ However, none provides many details for the artistic rendering of his person. While each biography presents narrative contexts concerning his location,



Figure 3.2

interlocutors, and activities, rarely do they spill much ink upon Padmasambhava's appearance. Instead, narrative shifts are encapsulated by his reception of a new name, and it is foremost these names that inspire his rich iconographical tradition.

From the earliest textual evidence of Padmasambhava, it is evident that this figure possessed a range of aliases. While the question may be posed as to whether they refer to more than one eighth-century tantric master, scholars generally accept that these names reference the same individual who gained renown throughout the Himalaya in the eighth century.⁵ The earliest extant mentions of him come from a first-millennium cache of manuscripts discovered in present-day Gansu province in China. The area of Dunhuang once occupied a vibrant crossroads along the silk routes at the northern limits of Tibet's imperial influence, which peaked around the time of Padmasambhava's sojourn in Tibet. It was at Mogao near Dunhuang in 1900 that a long-forgotten library cave, packed with thousands of unique manuscripts in Tibetan, Chinese, and Sanskrit, among other languages, was fortuitously discovered. Containing texts from as early as the fifth century, the cave had been sealed since the first decade of the eleventh century, preserving the oldest extant texts in the Tibetan language. There are imperial-era inscriptions on stelae that predate them, but not one mentions Padmasambhava.

Unlike these decrees, several Dunhuang manuscripts locate Padmasambhava and his activities in specific regions of the southern Himalaya, including Nyangrel's primary area of activity.⁶ Another site named in one of these documents is the still-renowned Yangléshō caves at Pharping, on the southwestern edge of the Kathmandu valley. Just outside the upper Asura cave is a handprint burned into stone, where the rock itself appears to have been scorched and made molten by a clearly defined right hand attributed to Padmasambhava (figure 3.2). Inside the cave is a small shrine to him (figure 3.3).

In Tibetan Buddhism, the supernatural ability to manipulate the ordinary world is expected from those who have realized its ultimate reality and thereby transcend its limitations. Throughout the Himalaya, Padmasambhava is credited with leaving countless footprints and handprints, whether burned into stone or fixed on the surface of water, as can be seen in a painting of him as Dorjé Drolö (rdo rje gro



Figure 3.3

Figure 3.2 Hand print outside the Asura Cave at Yangléshō, photograph by the author, Nepal, 2010

Figure 3.3 Inside the Asura Cave at Yangléshō, photograph by the author, Nepal, 2010



Figure 3.4

lod; figures 3.4, 3.20). This fierce manifestation is just one of the eight names and aspects that would come to define him.

Although the *Copper Island* presents over a dozen different names for Padmasambhava, these were swiftly delimited to a set of eight, though some variance is found, especially in subsequent texts. Rather than presenting some sort of anomaly, his many names can be understood as traditional and even expected. Having trained under the greatest Buddhist masters of the era and won the praise of many patrons, he has been awarded with an array of initiation names and princely titles in recognition of his enlightened activities. Within the *Copper Island* itself, however, there is no sense of order or limit: Padmasambhava receives one name after the next as he progresses through the wondrous events of his life in India. Curiously, the flow of his aliases ebbs as he reaches Tibet, but a close reading of the *Copper Island* clarifies that Nyangrel conceived of neither a static nor closed rubric for Padmasambhava's appellations; they simply were bestowed when appropriate as the narrative progressed.

In the unique statue shown in figure 3.5 the central figure of Padmasambhava in his most common guise is surrounded by ten additional iconographical forms.⁷ Rather than being flanked by both princesses, as is typical, on the left is a monk (possibly Śāntarakṣita) and on the right is only one consort, either Mandāravā or Yéshé Tsogyel (ye shes mtsho rgyal). In translation, his names are commonly presented as his eight aspects, eight forms, eight manifestations, and so forth, due as much to their eventual renown in various genres of devotional literature as to their artistic renditions.

It should be noted, however, that none of these translations has any reference to the most common Tibetan terminology, *tsen* (*mtshan*), which literally signifies an honorific (rather than ordinary) "name" or appellation. Whereas "name" precisely references the content drawn from his biographies, these alternative translations underscore each name's manifestation in a specific guise, thus emphasizing the art and iconography over textual content. As the form of each "name" develops

Figure 3.4 Padmasambhava as Dorjé Drolö (detail of figure 3.20), Tibet or Bhutan, 18th century, pigments on cloth, 25¼ × 16¼ inches (63.8 × 42.2 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, F1996.31.14 (HAR 528)

Figure 3.5 Padmasambhava and His Eight Manifestations, Tibet, 16th century, copper alloy, 9⅞ × 6¼ × 3⅜ inches (24.4 × 17.1 × 8.6 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, C2003.51.1 (HAR 65283)



Figure 3.5



Figure 3.6

through its execution in paintings and sculpture, texts would eventually gain inspiration from their visual details. Visionary encounters with these Padmasambhavas come to punctuate the biographies of many Tibetan masters and inform liturgy as much as iconography.

With regard to the artistic representation of Padmasambhava's eight names, some variance in their iconography might be expected as well, but overall they maintain an extraordinarily high degree of standardization. Even their earliest occurrences in the fifteenth century are easily recognizable as the standard depictions of the normative eight names.

This detail (figure 3.6) from a painting of Padmasambhava as Guru Drakpo (*gu ru drag po*), or the Fierce Guru (Figure 3.24), shows an early indigenous Tibetan focus of deity yoga practice that would be eclipsed by its elaboration into Dorjé Drolö. From left to right, the top tier shows the buddhas of the five families embracing their consorts,⁸ with Amitābha to the left of Padmasambhava and Avalokiteśvara to the right. Representing his truth body and complete enjoyment body, respectively, Padmasambhava is the magically emanated body. Together they form the three buddha bodies of the *padma*, or lotus, buddha family. To his right is possibly the emperor Tri Songdétse (*khri srong lde brtsan*; d. c. 800), next to two lay practitioners and three monks, as evidenced by the latter's yellow vests. The second tier is bracketed by slightly larger "blood-drinking" *heruka* deities on each end, with the eight primary manifestations of Padmasambhava between them, interrupted by his most generic guise at center, flanked by his two consorts. From left to right is Dorjéchang (*rdo rje chang*) embracing his consort; then Padmasambhava as a *paṇḍita*, or scholar; Loden Choksé (*blo ldan mchog sred*); and Péma Gyélpo (*padma rgyal po*). To the right of the central figure is the *yogin* Nyima Özer (*nyi ma 'od zer*) and the monk Śākya Senggé (*śākya seng ge*) followed by the two fierce forms, a blue Senggé Dradrok (*seng ge sgra sgrog*) and red Dorjé Drolö.

While the major events of Padmasambhava's life are broadly agreed upon, there is a rather astonishing degree of variance in their details and chronology. Such inconsistency is not only endemic in his biographies but found even in distinct recensions of the same biography.⁹ This is due in part to the fact that the life of Padmasambhava has been told in an endless series of newly revealed treasure teachings. For early revealers like Nyangrel, all treasure materials were literally material; whether old manuscripts, religious implements, or ritual substances, all treasures were tangible objects.¹⁰ Recently Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer have convincingly demonstrated that Nyangrel indeed relied on some old manuscripts not only for his groundbreaking compilation of Padmasambhava's life but for some practice materials as well.¹¹ Guru Chöwang (*gu ru chos dbang*; 1212–1270), the next of the great Buddhist treasure revealers and claimant to Nyangrel's postincarnation, already began to introduce

Figure 3.6 Padmasambhava as Guru Drakpo (detail of figure 3.24), Tibet, 15th century, pigments on cloth, 25¼ × 21 inches (65.4 × 53.3 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, C2002.24.9 (HAR 65125)

Figure 3.7 Padmasambhava, His Eight Manifestations and Life Story, Bhutan, 19th century, pigments on cloth, 52¼ × 31½ inches (134 × 80 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin, SC2012.4.13 (HAR 1093)



Figure 3.7

the possibility of immaterial downloads from the expanse of enlightened intent (*dgongs gter*), which offered an even broader creative license for innovation in textual production.¹²

The life of Padmasambhava endures not merely as a title but as a distinct genre of Tibetan literature, revealed and rediscovered again and again by an endless progression of new treasure revealers. While preceding iterations of the genre serve as inspiration and context, if not sources to be directly mined and copied, no single narrative has exclusive authority. Rather, as a testament of Padmasambhava himself, each treasure biography is authoritative in itself, above competition and beyond critique, though plenty of critics certainly emerged. For the entire history of Tibet, Tibetans have maintained a keen interest in history, and the scholars among them employed a critical approach to identify and investigate the many discrepancies in the accounts of perhaps the most universally celebrated era of Tibetan history. In response, numerous apologetics have defended those accounts, often explaining that the life of Padmasambhava is so profound as to be inconceivable, and only the faithless would fixate on historical discrepancies and inconsistent minutiae. From a contemporary multicultural perspective, however, we might appreciate the methodology of treasure recovery in Tibet, especially how it provided the opportunity for innovative telling and retelling of the life of this seminal figure for successive contemporary audiences.

Among the most exquisite depictions of Padmasambhava are biographical paintings that reproduce key episodes from the textual accounts of his life. These often rely upon his eight primary manifestations for their compositional structure, emphasizing a coherent visual arrangement rather than a chronological one; that is, the eight manifestations do not appear sequentially, as they would in text, but instead in accordance with visual cues that enhance the geometric balance of the piece. In this vibrant nineteenth-century example from Bhutan (figure 3.7), the episodes of his life are illustrated by the smaller figures in vignettes, which correlate with the larger eight forms of Padmasambhava adjacent to them. These vignettes surround the central figure of his most recognizable form, referred to in the Sanskrit as Padmasambhava and in Tibetan as Péma Jungné (*padma 'byung gnas*), and also as Tsokyé Dorjé (*mtsho skye rdo rje*). Its total composition presents numerous idiosyncrasies, including in the arrangement of the eight primary manifestations around the central figure of Padmasambhava.

Instead of all eight appearing in pairs on the left and right sides, with Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara stacked directly above the central figure, Orgyen Dorjéchang appears on the central axis with his consort (figure 3.9), standing in visually for the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra and consort, who share the same color scheme and occupy the same position in many paintings. Given Orgyen Dorjéchang's position high on the central axis, his partner, the *paṇḍita* also called Padmasambhava or Péma Jungné, is directly below the central figure.

It is not uncommon for some sets of the eight names to count Padmasambhava once in transliterated Sanskrit and then again in its Tibetan equivalent as Péma Jungné. The latter name often refers to the figure directly below the main one here, where the *paṇḍita* appears in monk's robes with a shaved head. While this role is somewhat generic, it becomes a popular subject of individual paintings where he dons a "*paṇḍita's* hat," as seen in figures 3.8, 2.4, and 2.9.



Figure 3.8



Figure 3.9

Figure 3.8 Scenes from the Life of Padmasambhava (detail of figure 3.25), Tibet, 18th–19th century, pigments on cloth, 67¼ × 42 inches (170.8 × 106.7 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, C2003.49.11 (HAR 65273)

Figure 3.9 Detail of figure 3.7



Figure 3.10

In his biographies in general, however, Padmasambhava's antinomian tantric exploits are favored over his more conventional activities; hence the image of Tsokyé Dorjé rises to the fore at the apex of the eight names' pictorial structure. In this detail (figure 3.9), Padmasambhava's ultimate truth body, the red Buddha Amitābha, occupies the top of the central axis, above Orgyen Dorjéchang, with Avalokiteśvara to the left, and a bearded figure, possibly Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (zhabs drung ngag dbang rnam rgyal; 1594-1651), who is credited with unifying Bhutan, to the right.¹³

The story begins at the upper left of the scroll painting, with the birth and discovery of Padmasambhava on the stamen of a lotus at the middle of Lake Dhanakośa in Oḍḍiyāna, when he receives the name Prince Tsokyé Dorjé (figure 3.10, bottom left of detail). At the top

Figure 3.10 Detail of figure 3.7



Figure 3.11

Péma Gyélpo holds court within the palace. At center appears to be Padmasambhava as the *yogin*, Nyima Özer; however, given that the painting here depicts the early stage of his life, this figure is likely from the pivotal episode when Padmasambhava resolves to set out on the tantric Buddhist path, then dances in *yogin*'s attire atop the palace and lets fly his trident, which falls and buries itself in the head of an infant, thus leading to his banishment from the kingdom.

Prince Tsokyé Dorjé, or Lake-Born Vajra (*tsokyé*, "lake-born," synonymous with *lotus*), is the first name bestowed upon Padmasambhava in the earliest recension of his earliest biography, Nyangrel's *Copper Island*. As is typical, no additional commentary on the name is provided within the text, but one interpretation of "Vajra" is that it signifies the "indestructible" nature of his realization. Even as an eight-year-old newly introduced to the world, his enlightenment is not suddenly discovered but is eternal and complete.

A conflict arises between Padmasambhava's names and their iconography because the *Copper Island* refers to him as Tsokyé Dorjé at two distinct points in the narrative: after his initial discovery, as previously described, and then later in his maturity. In the later episode, when he seduces the chaste princess of Zahor, Mandāravā, into the practice of sexual yoga, they are bound together and burned at the stake as punishment. After nine days they emerge unscathed from the flames, and at this time Padmasambhava once again receives the name Lake-Born Vajra from the awe-inspired populace, with *vajra* in this sense referring to his incombustibility. With the iconographical elaboration of Padmasambhava and Mandāravā, Tsokyé Dorjé eventually gains an alias, Orgyen Dorjéchang, owing to their clear similarity to another blue buddha of the same name (Dorjéchang, Vajradhara). The striking contrast between the deep night blue of Orgyen Dorjéchang and the pure white of his virtuous consort, Mandāravā, in part symbolizes Padmasambhava's profound insight into the depths of reality and Mandāravā's unimpeachable purity of intention (figure 3.11).

This detail of the biographical painting (figure 3.12, detail of figure 3.7) depicts the next episode in Zahor at bottom left, beneath Padmasambhava as Péma Gyélpo, the Lotus King. At this moment in the *Copper Island* he also gains the epithet Skull-Garlanded Lotus (Padma thod 'phreng), an adornment seen around his neck in the painting. Named Tsokyé Dorjé again upon his emergence from the flames, Padmasambhava then receives the royal title Péma Gyélpo when Mandāravā's awestruck father offers his kingdom. Péma Gyélpo's kingly vestments, the silken robes of a wheel-turning monarch, or *cakravartin*, again mirror the life of the Buddha (figures 3.13, 3.28). In his biography, Siddhārtha Gautama must choose between the ruling duties of his royal caste and renouncing them for the spiritual path. Thanks to Padmasambhava's progression of names and characteristics, however, the Second Buddha may inhabit one role before evolving beyond it to fulfill another. The remainder of Péma Gyélpo's iconographic details are artistic inventions rather than text-based details: not even his hand implements, a double-sided hand drum (*damaru*) and a mirror, symbolizing the sound that invokes the buddhas and the clear reflection of wisdom (both have ties to tantric ritual as well),¹⁴ are described in his early biographies.

Péma Gyélpo's iconographic pair usually sits directly opposite him, to the right side of the main figure. Symmetrical with Péma Gyélpo, Loden Choksé (figure 3.14) dons similar attire while raising a hand



Figure 3.12



Figure 3.13

Figure 3.11 Padmasambhava as Orgyen Dorjéchang, Tibet, 19th century, pigments on cloth, 43½ × 29¼ inches (110.5 × 75.6 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin, C2006.66.284 (HAR 656)

Figure 3.12 Detail of figure 3.7

Figure 3.13 Padmasambhava as Péma Gyélpo (detail of figure 3.28), Eastern Tibet, 18th century, pigments on cloth, 27½ × 19½ inches (69.9 × 48.3 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin, C2006.66.257 (HAR 374)

drum in his right hand and, with his left, resting a skull cup at his lap, but the narratives concerning him have nothing to do with kings or royalty. Instead, this form of Padmasambhava completes his most extensive studies, receives an array of empowerments, and undergoes his most rigorous training at the feet of many renowned masters, as depicted by the vignettes that surround him. Within these smaller images, however, Padmasambhava does not appear in the kingly guise of Loden Choksé but as the monk Śākya Senggé, whose larger depiction is adjacent to the vignettes, which again correlate with the *Copper Island* narrative. These smaller figures of Padmasambhava also resemble his depiction as the scholar, identified by his red hat. His scholarly aspect is not explicitly defined in his biographies, however, whereas Śākya Senggé is the manifestation that engages in the trainings depicted here (rectangular-format Tibetan texts are also visible). At the middle, he trains in Mahāyoga and the Eighteen Tantras, with Vajrasattva dictating them directly from the buddha realms.

Compare this detail with the painting that features Loden Choksé (figure 3.16). On the right side it illustrates his studies under various masters, and at the bottom left his meditative practice in the charnel grounds as he contemplates the smoldering ashes of funeral pyres and vultures feasting on human carrion. These details concur with narratives describing Loden Choksé, and his royal attire reflects an artistic preference for symmetry and balance in the eight names as a single composition, where his flowing robes simply complement those of Péma Gyélpo. Moreover, the golden crown and jewelry reflect his elevated religious status rather than any worldly claims: these are the adornments of the complete enjoyment body, naturally manifest upon one who has attained it.

Equally symmetrical and directly beneath the so-called kings (in figure 3.7) are the fierce, fire-engulfed manifestations, deep blue Senggé Dradok (see also figure 1.12) and blood-red Dorjé Drolö (see also figures 1.13, 3.20). Their monstrous iconography is not described at all within his biographies, and yet Padmasambhava's acts of unconquerable strength and esoteric power clearly inspire their artistic renderings. In a famous episode, Padmasambhava is invited to the epicenter of the Buddhist universe, the Mahābodhi Temple in Bōdh Gayā, imagined in the biographical painting (figure 3.7) as a large golden *stūpa* surrounded by smaller ones. Given that the artist's rendering does not represent the actual site, he clearly had not been fortunate enough to make the pilgrimage there from Bhutan (figure 3.15).



Figure 3.15

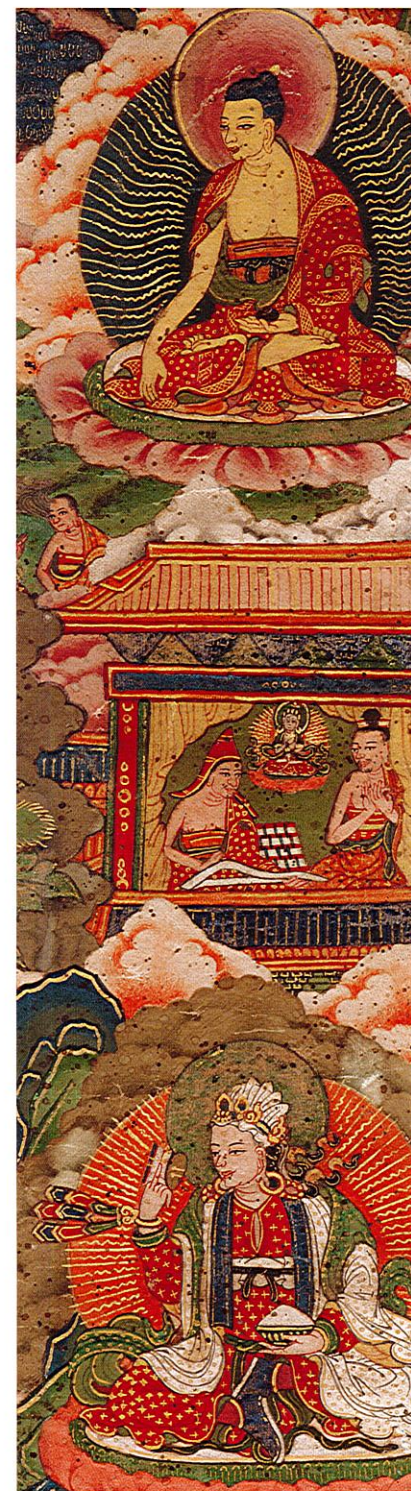


Figure 3.14

Figure 3.14 Detail of figure 3.7

Figure 3.15 Detail of figure 3.7

Figure 3.16 Padmasambhava as Loden Choksé, Tibet, 18th century, pigments on cloth, 22¼ × 16 in. (57.8 × 40.6 cm.), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin, C2006.66.32 (HAR 904)



Figure 3.16



Figure 3.17

As pictured in the lower right, a group of Buddhist scholars were engaged in philosophical and magical competition with a group of “heretics” (*tīrthika*). The two sides wagered that the losers would renounce their tradition and convert. While the Buddhists were confident they could win the philosophical debate, they feared a humiliating defeat in supernormal abilities, or *siddhi*. This dichotomy between the exoteric sciences of logic and the esoteric abilities of meditative attainment is a common one; moreover, its occurrence here foreshadows the exact circumstances that would bring Padmasambhava to Tibet. When the Tibetans attempt to construct the first great Buddhist monastery, Samyé, what is built by day is razed by night. Although the great abbot Śāntarakṣita’s expertise in Buddhist philosophy might lead to enlightenment beyond this world, it becomes clear that mastery of tantric ritual is required to subdue the forces within it. Thus Śāntarakṣita suggests that the emperor invite Padmasambhava to tame the landscape and establish the ground. His success in this endeavor is given prominent place at the top right of the biographical painting, where Padmasambhava inscribes a geomantic ground-taming *maṇḍala*, common to Tibetan architectural preparatory rites (figure 3.17, top).

Back at Bōdh Gayā, before his sojourn in Tibet, Padmasambhava arrives and overwhelms his heretical competitors and thereby becomes renowned as Senggé Dradrok, the “Lion’s Roar” of the Buddhist teachings. He is seen receiving offerings as he sits on the diamond throne (*vajrāsana*), the exact place where Buddha Śākyamuni attained enlightenment, directly beneath the Bodhi tree (figure 3.18), thereby signifying his attainment as well.

Curiously, these events are not always depicted in singular paintings of Senggé Dradrok (see figure 1.12), but the fine depiction of Padmasambhava here evokes his compelling power in this guise.



Figure 3.18

3.17 Detail of figure 3.7

3.18 Detail of figure 3.7

Senggé Dradrok's fierce pair is Dorjé Drolö (figure 3.20; see also 1.13), but this name and iconography have a longer, more complex history. Whereas Senggé Dradok and his narrative context are quite consistent across Padmasambhava's biographies, the name Dorjé Drolö appears later: it was unknown to Nyangrel in the twelfth century. Nyangrel introduced a fearsome precedent, Péma Tötrenq or Skull-Garlanded Lotus, who is closely connected to an independent tradition of deity yoga practice focusing upon Padmasambhava as the Fierce Guru (Guru Drakpo). Nyangrel is among its earliest documented proponents and thus may be featured among its lineage holders (upper figures in figure 2.19).

Given that deity yoga relies on visualization as a primary technology for liberation, its liturgies must precisely describe the appearance of the focal deities. When artistically depicted on a scroll painting, the iconography of the deity functions as a mnemonic support for visualization practice. Several paintings specific to Nyangrel's Guru Drakpo lineage exist, and the iconic correlation between this deity and Dorjé Drolö is readily apparent. In the circa fifteenth-century example (figures 3.19, 3.24), the Fierce Guru, with two legs, is blood red, ensconced in flames, and garlanded with skulls in ferocious aspect, his right hand raising a golden *vajra*, and his left clasping a nine-headed scorpion (counted by pairs of eyes, including the last set on the tail). This penchant for the number nine in the implement held in the left hand denotes an exchange with a deity from the indigenous Tibetan tradition of Bön, Takla Membar (Stag la/lha me 'bar), who shares the same general appearance of both Guru Drakpo and Dorjé Drolö but bears a nine-pointed sword in his left hand. In turn, the name of this fierce red Bönpo deity, which translates as the "Blazing Tiger God," may have contributed to his conflation with Dorjé Drolö and the popularization of one of the latter's most definitive features, his mount atop a tigress. In both of Padmasambhava's



Figure 3.19 Padmasambhava as Guru Drakpo
(detail of figure 3.24), Tibet, 15th century,
pigments on cloth, 25¼ × 21 inches (65.4 ×
53.3 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, C2002.24.9
(HAR 65125)



Figure 3.20

fourteenth-century biographies, his consort Mandāravā possesses the power of personal transfiguration or shapeshifting, with a tigress one of her preferred forms.

As can be seen in this example (figure 3.20), Dorjé Drolö shares much of his iconography with Guru Drakpo and Takla Membar, though he gains additional robes and exchanges Guru Drakpo's nine-headed scorpion and Takla Membar's nine-pointed sword for a three-bladed ritual dagger (*kīla*, *phur pa*). Skull-garlanded Padmasambhava's iconographical elaboration as the meditational deity Guru Drakpo, his evolution into Dorjé Drolö, and all of their cross-pollination with Takla Membar are visually encapsulated by the left-hand implement in figure 3.21, where Padmasambhava as Guru Drakpo holds both a *purpa* dagger and a scorpion in his left hand.

In the biographical painting the fourth and final pairing (figure 3.7, far left and right of central character), compositionally but not chronologically, according to the biographies, is linked as much by their practical opposition as their visual symmetry. On the right side is Śākya Senggé, the "Lion of the Śākya" clan from which Buddha Śākyamuni himself hails. In Padmasambhava's biographies, this is the ordination name bestowed when he becomes a monk under Prabhāhasti (eighth century) in the *Copper Island*. Seizing on a very late prophecy attributed to Buddha Śākyamuni, many subsequent biographies assert that Padmasambhava was born as an emanation of the Buddha himself just decades after his death in the fifth century BCE. Not long thereafter, Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant, ordains him Śākya Senggé, nominally confirming his direct link to the Buddha. Therefore, by the time Padmasambhava arrives in Tibet, he is over 1200 years old.

Apparently Nyangrel was unaware of this prophecy, as he depicts Padmasambhava's range of activities, from his birth to his departure from Tibet, as occurring well within the span of an ordinary human lifetime. As Padmasambhava's biographical tradition evolves and incorporates such prophecies, his life extends toward eternity. Traditionally this illustrates the supremacy of his realization and his freedom from any fetters of this world.

Regardless of the millennium in which Śākya Senggé was active, Padmasambhava's biographies concur that he focused on the doctrines of tantric Buddhism throughout this period with few exceptions. His time in monastic robes was brief, as he swiftly receives empowerment from an enlightened nun and with it the secret name Loden Choksé when he encounters her in the form of a female buddha, here depicted as a formidable emanation of Tārā, Kurukullā (top left of figure 3.22). Padmasambhava has already disrobed and is shown as a *tantrika*, thus signifying a reversion to his primary identity, now named Nyima Özer, Rays of the Sun.

It is difficult to ignore that this emanation of Padmasambhava bears the same personal name as the revealer of his first biography, Nyangrel Nyima Özer, and yet Padmasambhava never receives this name in Nyangrel's *Copper Island*. Nyangrel was not so bold as to name Padmasambhava after himself in this text, but one of his own biographies, the *Stainless Proclamations (Dri ma med pa)*, details a series of visions later in life. Having concluded his treasure recoveries and settled down to establish his lineages at Mawochok (smra bo lcog), his hermitage in southern Tibet, Nyangrel spent the final decades of his



Figure 3.21

Figure 3.20 Padmasambhava as Dorjé Drolö, Tibet or Bhutan, 18th century, pigments on cloth, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches (63.8 × 42.2 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, F1996.31.14 (HAR 528)

Figure 3.21 Padmasambhava as Guru Drakpo (detail of figure 2.19), Tibet, 19th century, pigments on cloth, 49 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (126.1 × 78.1 cm), Rubin Museum of Art, gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin, C2006.66.3 (HAR 9)



Figure 3.22



Figure 3.23

life in meditative retreat, focusing on the various tantric practices he had revealed as treasure texts. When attainment dawns, he describes being transported to the pure realms where he meets various enlightened interlocutors. In one such vision, given his life long devotion to Padmasambhava, Nyangrel finds himself at the center of a mandalic array surrounded by the eight great charnel grounds. Greeting him at the entrance to each is an aide, readily identified as one of India's famed *Mahāsiddhas*, who helpfully directs Nyangrel toward an emanation of Padmasambhava sitting beneath a tree. Nyangrel offers his first visual impression of each Padmasambhava from afar before approaching. Padmasambhava then introduces himself by names that correlate to the *Copper Island* with the exception of a single addition: the eighth and final one is a *yogin* named Nyima Özer, just like Nyangrel himself.

Of significance is that Nyangrel's vision appears to be the original source for the delimitation of Padmasambhava's names into a closed set of eight. Unlike the *Copper Island*, where more triumphs and wonders may bring more names and titles, Nyangrel's vision necessitates eight names alone, one for each of the eight great charnel grounds at the four cardinal and four intermediate directions. Nyangrel describes the "eight positions of Guru Padmasambhava" (*gu ru padma'i bkod pa brgyad*) because of their arrangement around this visionary *maṇḍala*. His postincarnation, Guru Chöwang, moves the set of eight towards closure by encountering them in a dream and introducing the now normative term, the "eight names of the guru" (*gu ru mtshan brgyad*). Additionally, Chöwang's dream sequence also appears among the earliest sources for the last of the normative eight names ascribed to Padmasambhava, Dorjé Drolö.

Returning to Padmasambhava as Nyima Özer, later biographers play off the literal meaning of his name, "Rays of the Sun," to develop an

Figure 3.22 Detail of figure 3.7

Figure 3.23 Detail of figure 3.7

elaborate narrative where he stakes the sun to the earth and thereby halts its trajectory through the sky. While interpretations of his iconography often assume that the circular object tethered to his left hand by a ray of light is the sun, there is some variance. As depicted in the biographical painting (figure 3.23), Nyima Özer holds a lasso to capture the sun; the circle at the end of the line is a loop as evidenced by the clouds visible through it. With the left hand he also forms the threatening gesture, which is directed up toward his target in the sky.

In the *Stainless Proclamations*, however, Nyangrel encounters Nyima Özer holding a round mirror instead. Thus, as Nyangrel's vision progresses toward its conclusion, which occurs as he approaches the end of his life, having rotated to each of the eight points of the *maṇḍala*, he encounters his own enlightened analog, vividly discerning his own reflection and meeting his own true nature. Ultimately, Nyangrel Nyima Özer is Padmasambhava, not just in his time but for all time. He transcends self and other, existence and nonexistence, suffering and liberation, duality and differentiation, so there is no past, present, or future. As the final instruction, reality itself, Padmasambhava is the primordial guru beyond time.

Much of this essay considers the magically emanated bodies of the buddhas in their textual depictions as well as their artistic forms, which interact in a dynamically symbiotic relationship of mutual influence and exchange. On the one hand, this relationship highlights the uniquely human process of dialogue between precedence and innovation that shaped these narratives and iconographies into the diverse refractions of their current forms. And yet in Nyangrel's ultimate experience he traverses the visionary planes of the buddha realms, transcending the coarse media of this world and the magically emanated bodies of the buddhas, to arrive at the pure luminosity of the complete enjoyment body. He travels beyond the limits of cyclic existence, and even beyond the groundbreaking biography he had already produced, to discover that his ultimate identity already resides inseparable from him. In so many respects the final realization of Tibetan Buddhism is condensed into the moment when Nyangrel meets Padmasambhava as Nyima Özer: self as ordinarily constructed does not exist; one's true identity is enlightened already. In fully realizing this, everything dissolves into one taste as boundless pure awareness: the truth body, enlightenment, and liberation itself. This may be the end of Nyangrel's path, but it is only the beginning of Padmasambhava's broad renown. Like rainbows refracting from a crystal, the brilliant spectra of Padmasambhava's eight names and their iconographic forms have served as paths toward that same realization ever since.

Figure 3.24 Padmasambhava as Guru
Drakpo, 15th century, pigments on cloth,
25¼ × 21 inches (65.4 × 53.3 cm), Rubin Museum
of Art, C2002.24.9 (HAR 65125)



Endnotes

- 1 See Doney's essay in this volume.
- 2 The history of the development of Buddhism in India is generally divided into an early period of about five hundred years, beginning with the life of the historical Buddha and progressing through the centuries as his teachings were collected, codified, and set to the page. A new era of innovation began by the first century CE, however, and proponents of these later schools came to define themselves as the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna) in contradistinction to those that preceded them. The esoteric traditions of Buddhist *tantra*, which would come to be collectively known as the Indestructible Vehicle (Vajrayāna), begin to develop by the seventh century.
- 3 Strong 2001, 8-9.
- 4 A late recension of Nyangrel's text (*Zangs gling ma*) has been translated in Tsogyal 1993. An unreliable translation of Orgyen Lingpa's text (*Padma bka'i thang yig shel brag ma*) is available as Tsogyel 2008. An abridged translation of Sanggyé Lingpa's text (*Gser gyi phreng ba*) is in Evans-Wentz 2000, 105-92.
- 5 Cantwell and Mayer 2013, 27.
- 6 For a survey of Padmasambhava in early sources, see Hirshberg 2016, 6-18.
- 7 See also Pakhoutova's essay in this volume.
- 8 In tantric Buddhism, buddhas are often divided into five families by means of their defining qualities. Likewise, each family is associated with a symbol and a primary color: the *tathāgata* buddha family is often symbolized by the wheel of Dharma (*dharmacakra*, white), then there are the *vajra* (blue), jewel (*ratna*, yellow), lotus (*padma*, red), and action (*karma*, green) families, the last of which is symbolized by a double *dorjé* or crossed *vajra*.
- 9 See Doney 2014, especially 25-30 and 43-45.
- 10 For a survey of early treasure, especially Nyangrel's, see Hirshberg 2016, chapter 3.
- 11 Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 87-98.
- 12 For an analysis of Guru Chöwang's claim to the reincarnation of Nyangrel, see Hirshberg 2017. For the introduction of immaterial treasure see Hirshberg 2016, 132-33n249.
- 13 This identification is forwarded by Jeff Watt in his notes to the piece on Himalayan Art Resources: <http://www.himalayanart.org/items/1093>.
- 14 Beer 1999, 258, 188.