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An Early Maṇḍala of Cakrasaṃvara

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It is with a spirit of joyous gratitude and long-standing friendship that I dedicate this essay to Dan Martin whose insights and constructive criticism have been a source of constant inspiration and help to my research, while his tibeto-logic.com postings bring laughter and many reflections!

Introduction

This maṇḍala of Cakrasaṃvara (fig. 1: Maṇḍala of Cakrasaṃvara, distemper on cloth, 65 x 52.7 cm, Tibet, private collection) was first published by the present writer as plate 92 of Heller 1999. At the time, it was tentatively analyzed as a product of the 14th century, a chronology which is re-evaluated in the present essay. When I first studied this maṇḍala, only the front of the painting was accessible due to a frame surround; the private collection provided an unpublished report which identified the masters of the lineage of the upper register, allowing a tentative chronology.¹ Shortly thereafter, thanks to Dan Martin's careful reading of my essay and his spontaneous sending of insightful comments on April 3, 2000, it became clear that the chronology as published was incorrect due to misidentification of the masters of the lineage. Subsequently, the reverse of the thangka has been photographed. It is published here for the first time (fig. 2: reverse of the Maṇḍala of Cakrasaṃvara, 65 x 52.7 cm, Tibet, private collection), thus allowing the necessary corrections to be made and the source rendered visible for public attention.

1. The composition of the thangka

The composition of this maṇḍala is organized in a very simple manner. The upper register of the cloth has a horizontally aligned series of portraits of the spiritual lineage, starting from left to right, with eleven historical masters as the followers of the blue Saṃvara and the

¹ Heller 1999: 150-151, citing Stoddard 1993 (unpublished).

red Vajrayoginī, standing in tantric embrace at far left; both represented with one head and two arms. The main area of the cloth is concentrated on the maṇḍala with Cakrasaṃvara and Vajrayoginī at the center, where Cakrasaṃvara, having four faces, crowned with a moon crescent, and with twelve arms, is embracing Vajrayoginī, again with one face and two arms. Outside the outermost circle of the maṇḍala, in the four corners there are additional meditation deities and portraits of Buddhist masters. The central area of the present painting has a star configuration with 62 deities, corresponding to the specifics of the 62 deity maṇḍala of Cakrasaṃvara which stems from the transmission by the siddha Luipa (10th century).² There are two 62 deity Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala with this star configuration. While the teaching according to Luipa has the male deities of the body cakra (*kāyacakra*) represented as white with four arms, the Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala stemming from the siddha Nagpopa has the *kāyacakra* male deities as white with two arms.³ Luipa figures prominently among the members of the spiritual lineage of teachers (*bla ma'i brgyud*) of the present thangka (see below). In the lower register, from left to right there are eleven additional deities, with a Buddhist monk performing a ritual, apparently a consecration ritual, in the lower right corner.

The inscriptions

On the front of the thangka, there are no names inscribed beneath any of the Buddhist masters or deities. It is the reverse of the thangka that has mantra dedication inscriptions organized like a star at the center of the composition, as well as the horizontal alignment for the names of the masters of the spiritual lineage of the upper register. In the lower register, with again a horizontal alignment of deities and the monk performing a ritual, there are no names inscribed, only *oṃ-ah-hūṃ* aligned vertically behind each protective deity and the portrait of the seated monk.

It is the upper register that provides the key to understanding this thangka. From left to right, in very clear *dbu can* script in black letters on the pale beige canvas, each figure has *oṃ-ah-hūṃ* in vertical alignment and beneath, horizontally written are the following names:

Ṣaṃvara and Vajrayoginī: Oṃ hri ha ha hūṃ hri dza

² BDRC P891

<https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:P8891https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1269> Indian adepts, identifiable Mahāsiddhas.

³ Bsod nams rgya mtsho and Tachikawa 1991: 114-117.

Lu yi ba na mo : Homage to Luipa
na mo Dha ra ka pa (sic: Dārikapa) : Homage to Dārikapa
na mo Bram ze: Homage to the Brahmin (the nickname of Saraha)⁴
na mo Dril bu pa: Homage to Ghaṅṭapāda (the adept who holds a bell)
na mo A va dhū ti: Homage to Avadhūti
na mo Chos kyī rdo rje: Homage to Dharmavajra⁵
na mo Byang chub bzang po: Homage to Bodhibhadra⁶
na mo Rdo rje gdan pa: Homage to Vajrāsana⁷
na mo A phyā ka ra (sic: Abhayākara): Homage to Abhayākara
na mo dpal Rgwa Lo: Homage to Rgwa Lo tsā ba⁸
na mo Zhang sgom: Homage to Zhang the meditator, ie. Lama Zhang Brtson 'grus grags pa (1122–1193).⁹

The earlier analysis and chronology of this lineage was vitiated due to the mistake in the identification of the last two members of this lineage. In this context of homage to Dan Martin, I am most grateful to Dan for kindly informing me of the error. It is fitting to bring his judicious comments to public attention. Dan wrote, "[T]he teacher identified as Rgwa Lo tsā ba (1203–1282) was so named because he was believed to be a reincarnation of an earlier master, who was also called Rgwa Lo tsā ba (1105–1198). It was he who studied with Abhayākara Gupta in India and who gave Cakrasaṃvara initiations to Zhang Rin po che. I really see no reason to give the thangka a 14th century date, and given that the lineage representation in the upper register is 'complete' up to Zhang Rin po che, the patron was most likely a direct disciple of Zhang. In any case, it is a Tshal pa thangka, and the Tshal pa had already gone into considerable decline by the 14th century."¹⁰

⁴ The writing of the letters of his name merit attention. Instead of the typical circle of the bindu , to mark the ṃ of bram ze, here the anusvāra is indicated as two slanted lines. This is unusual and perhaps a later anusvāra, as if resembling an inverted *da* to indicate a Sanskrit letter superscript. I thank Leonard van der Kuijp for this clarification (personal communication 14.09.2021).

⁵ BDRC P4CZ15211 Paṅḍita Dharmavajra
<https://library.bdrclibrary.org/show/bdr:P4CZ15211>

⁶ BDRC P3820, Paṅḍita Bodhibhadra, teacher of Marpa (?1012–1097) .

⁷ BDRC P43, Vajrāsana the Elder, teacher of Abhayākara (1104–1125)
<https://library.bdrclibrary.org/show/bdr:P43>.

⁸ BDRC P 3674 Rgwa Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1105–1198)
<https://library.bdrclibrary.org/show/bdr:P3674>

⁹ BDRC P1857 Lama Zhang, de facto ruler of Lhasa in the 12th century.
<https://library.bdrclibrary.org/show/bdr:P1857>

¹⁰ Personal communication, D. Martin, April 2000.

Furthermore, Dan's additional comments of the time are pertinent with regards to Lama Zhang's studies of Cakrasaṃvara: "I know Zhang received the Cakrasaṃvara initiations a few times from Rgwa Lo because it is recounted in Zhang's autobiography. Zhang also wrote a biography of Rgwa Lo (in which Rgwa Lo's studies with Abhayākara are related)."¹¹ Dan provided the following quotation, one of the lineages included among Lama Zhang's writings as published in the 1972 edition of his *Bka' thor bu*. Despite numerous misspellings of the names, it is clear that Lama Zhang specifies that he himself, *zhang gi sprang ban bdag*, "I, the beggar-monk of the Zhang [clan]," had been given the teachings by the great Rgwa lo tsā ba, who had in turn received them from Paṇḍita Abhayākara Gupta and the earlier members represented on the maṇḍala as far as Dril bu pa, who would have received the teachings directly from the Wisdom Dakini partner (*yum* Ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ma) of Cakrasaṃvara:

lhan cig skyes pa'i dbang du byas na / bcom ldan 'das dpal
'khor lo bde mchog gi yum YE SHES KYI MKHA' 'GRO MAS /
slob dpon RDO RJE DRIL BU BA la bshad / des A BA DHU TI PA
la bshad / des SPYOD MDZAD CHOS KYI RDO RJE la bshad / de
BYANG CHUB BZANG PO la bshad / des bla ma RDO RJE BDEN
PA la bshad / des bla ma pan ti ta A BHYA KA RA GHU PA TA la
bshad / des du khrod chen po bsil ba'i tshal du dngos grub
bsnyes pa'i dpal chen RGA' LO la bshad / des ZHANG GIS (SIC:
GI) SPRANG BAN bdag la snang pa'o //¹²

More recent research on Lama Zhang, his teachings and his studies has appeared in the two *oeuvres magistrales* of Carl Yamamoto and of Per Sørensen and Guntram Hazod, in collaboration with Guge Tsering Gyalbo.¹³ Yamamoto has notably provided the citation of verses of praise written by Lama Zhang for his teacher Rgwa Lo tsa ba, where he refers to himself as Zhang sgom, Zhang the meditator, Zhang the hermit, which is the precise term written as his name in the *bla ma'i brgyud pa* on this Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala.¹⁴ Among the epiphany of visionary empowerments during Lama Zhang's meditations in 1165 in the Jokhang, Cakrasaṃvara is prominent.¹⁵ In addition to the transmission of the teachings on Cakrasaṃvara, Sørensen, Hazod and Gyalbo in their annotated translation of the *Gung thang*

¹¹ Martin Ibid.

¹² Martin Ibid. citing *Bka' thor bu* 1972: 436.

¹³ Yamamoto 2012; Sørensen, Hazod and Gyalbo 2007.

¹⁴ Yamamoto 2012: 280, series of praise verses dedicated to rGwa Lo tsā ba.

¹⁵ Yamamoto 2015: 114.

dkar chag further elucidate the close relation of Rgwa lo tsā ba and Lama Zhang, who served as his personal assistant as of 1149.¹⁶

It is thus very clear that the chronology for the spiritual lineage is coherent with what is known of the transmission of Cakrasaṃvara teachings to Lama Zhang. In the spiritual lineage of the upper register, the portrait of Lama Zhang presents his face in three-quarter profile, emphasizing the receding hairline with two bald zones above his temples, and his hair is dark; he appears to have a very slight goatee. He is wearing red monastic robes and a voluminous yellow outer cloak. This style of portraiture corresponds closely to his representation in the famous Lhasa icon of the silk tapestry portrait now conserved in the Potala, which is understood to be a faithful copy of an earlier thangka, ie, a later copy in woven silk (*kesi*) of a portrait thangka painted during the lifetime of Lama Zhang or shortly thereafter (Figure 3 Portrait of Gung thang bla ma Zhang, silk tapestry, 84 x 54 cm, 13th century, Potala Palace Collection).¹⁷ Dan Martin evoked this silk tapestry in his memorable essay posted on tibeto-logic.com.¹⁸ One specific aesthetic aspect of the present Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala that is quite distinctive is the numerous delicate floral motifs in varied colors as well as budding vine tendrils in tones of pale blue, rose, deep red, yellow and green - these are found surrounding the portraits in the corners outside the actual maṇḍala outer circle of fire. As a chronological and aesthetic parallel, one may recall the mid-13th century maṇḍala of the Sakya monastery in the Byang ma lha khang of the Lha khang chen mo, where similar smaller scale multi-color floral and vine elements are painted in the corners of the maṇḍala murals.¹⁹ (Figure 5. Detail of maṇḍala, in the Byang ma chapel of Sa skya's Lha khang chen mo). Although lacking additional Tshal pa thangka for comparison to this exceptional Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala, it is nonetheless proposed to re-evaluate the present maṇḍala as a 13th century thangka produced in the context of the Tshal pa lineage, precisely as Dan Martin had identified it.

Thanks again to Dan Martin for his knowledgeable suggestion!

¹⁶ Sørensen, Hazod and Gyalbo 2007, vol 1: 78-79, fn.30.

¹⁷ Sørensen 2007, vol 2: 354-362. Sørensen 2007, vol. 2: 377 "early 1200's" date for this tapestry.

¹⁸ <https://tibeto-logic.blogspot.com/2012/01/new-works-on-works-of-lama-zhang.html>

¹⁹ Henss 2014: 747

2. *Illustrations*

Figure 1. Cakrasamvara Maṅḍala, pigments on cotton, 65 x 52.7 cm. Tibet, 13th century, private collection.



Figure 2. Reverse of the Cakrasaṃvara Maṅḍala, ink on cotton, 65 x 52.7 cm, Tibet, 13th century, private collection.



Figure 3. Portrait of Lama Zhang, silk tapestry, dimensions, 84 x 54 cm., 13th century (based on an earlier Tibetan thangka), collection of the Potala Palace.



Figure 4. Portrait of Lama Zhang, detail of the Cakrasaṃvara Maṇḍala, private collection.



Figure 5. Detail of a Vairocana Maṇḍala, 13th century, Byang ma lha khang, Lha khang chen mo, Sa skya Monastery, photograph by the author, 2004.

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