

Explore Lineage Paintings

Chokyi Lodro and Milarepa
Tibet; 16th century
Pigments on cloth
F1997.39.5 (HAR 562)

In Tibetan Buddhism the specific lineage of teachers of each school is carefully documented through sets of paintings. The lineage always begins with a divine figure and then shows Indian teachers followed by Tibetan teachers in chronological order.

This painting is part of a larger set of twelve paintings. Tibetan hanging scrolls, known as thangkas, were often commissioned by patrons who would decide how many paintings to include in the set. The set that this painting comes from depicts the first two teachers of the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The series was commissioned during the life of the Karmapa Wangchug Dorje (1555–1603).

At the left-center is Marpa Chokyi Lodro, the founder of this Buddhist tradition that emphasizes intensive meditation. On the right is Marpa's most famous student, Milarepa, who is known as one of the greatest yogi-poets of Tibet.

Touch the painting to learn more about its details



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Touch a detail to explore it further



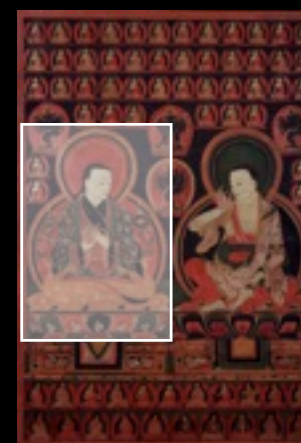


Marpa

Marpa, the founder of the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, was born in southern Tibet in 1021 CE. He studied Buddhism as a child and later set out to study further in India.

Marpa stayed in India for twelve years and studied with the teacher Naropa. Upon Marpa's return to Tibet, he married a woman named Demema, began a farm, and taught disciples of his own. He imported Buddhist texts from India and translated them into Tibetan, which earned him the name "Marpa the Translator." He also introduced a form of religious poem called a doha, which would be made famous by his best known disciple, Milarepa.

In this painting Marpa is shown on the left. In this style of painting the teacher is always pictured to the disciple's right, his honorary side. Marpa's long hair and layman's clothing tell the viewer he is not a monk.



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Milarepa

Milarepa is one of the most beloved yogi-poets in Tibet and was Marpa's foremost disciple. Born in 1052 CE, his father died and his greedy uncle and aunt forced Milarepa to work as a slave. He learned black magic and murdered them to avenge this injustice. However, he regretted his violent actions and sought a Buddhist teacher to redeem himself.

Before allowing Milarepa to study, Marpa made Milarepa perform many difficult tasks. Later, Milarepa retreated into the mountains to live a simple life. He wore only a cotton cloth, or repa, hence his name, "Mila the Cotton Cloth One." He also composed songs that became famous.

In one of his songs Milarepa paid homage to Marpa, singing:

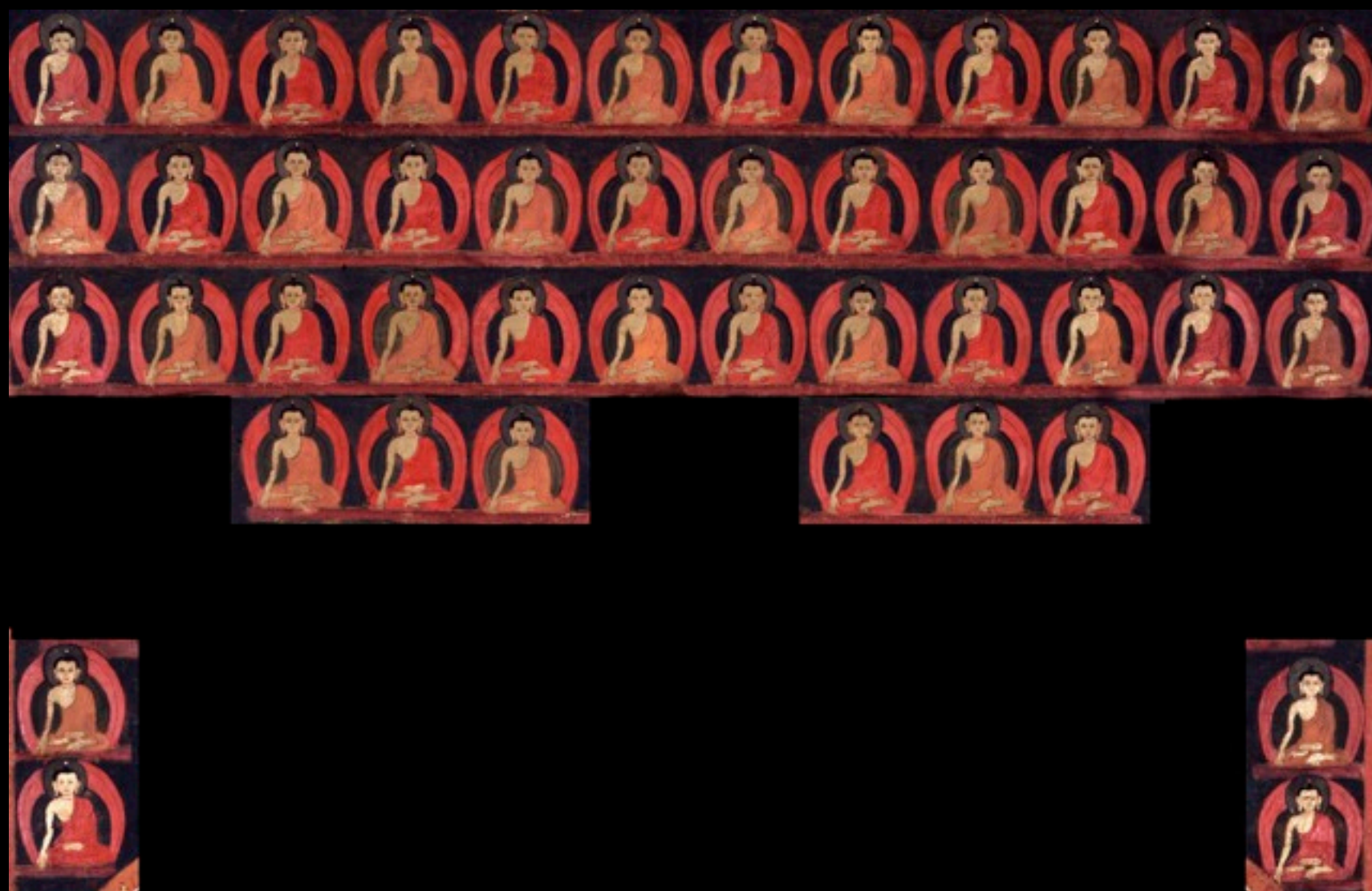
"I bow to the feet of Lama Marpa
Who offered me buddhahood in the palm of his hand
By confronting me with reality
Through revelation of the natural state's nature."



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Forty-six Buddha Figures

The top registers and sides of the painting contain forty-six buddha figures, who, despite their different colored robes, all represent the Buddha Shakyamuni. They are a portion of the one thousand buddhas of the present age. The full set of paintings depicts all one thousand of them.



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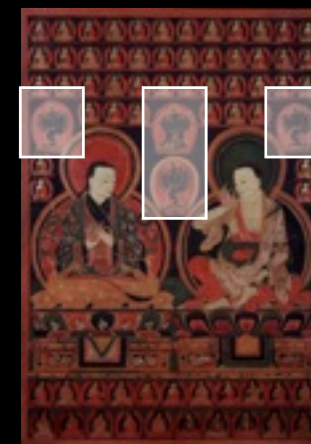
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Meditational Deities



Between and outside of the two central figures of this painting are several forms of Hevajra, a deity specific to this tradition. Hevajra is a personal meditational deity, or yidam. As meditational buddhas, yidam serve to symbolize through their colors, forms, attributes, and gestures the path of Tantric Buddhism, which seeks a rapid path to enlightenment. The help of an accomplished teacher is necessary for the rigorous spiritual practice aspirants must undergo after choosing the tantric path. Yidam come in different forms, including wrathful, peaceful and semi-wrathful. Hevajra is a semi-wrathful deity usually depicted with eight heads wearing skull crowns, though six are visible here, sixteen arms, and four legs in a dancing posture. He is shown in union with the female deity Nairatmya.



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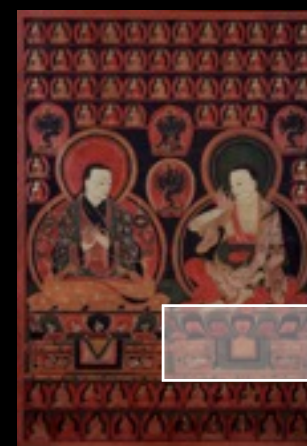
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Lotus Throne and Snow Lions



Marpa and Milarepa are shown seated on lotus thrones. In the Buddhist tradition the lotus symbolizes purity of mind, transcendence, wisdom, and divine creation. The multicolored lotus petals—red, blue, orange, and green—represent different aspects of wisdom. Discs of the sun and moon, hard to see because they are under the seated figure, are placed on top of the petals, symbolizing the union of wisdom and method.

The snow lion, located below the throne, is also known as the “lion of the Shakya clan.” Milarepa once had a dream that included a snow lion that was interpreted by Marpa to mean, “The lion shows the yogin’s lion-like nature. The lion’s four paws represent love, compassion, equanimity, and rejoicing. The lion’s roaming free over the mountain peaks show that the yogin has gained the realm of absolute freedom.”



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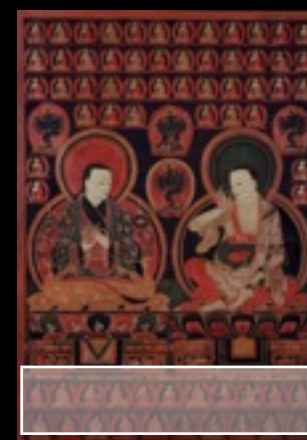
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Lineage Figures

Buddha Shakyamuni



Across the bottom of the painting are two rows of lineage figures. The top row consists of an image of Buddha Shakyamuni flanked by the group of philosophers known as the “Six Ornaments and Two Excellent Ones of India.” Two additional philosophers have been included here. In the bottom row are five pairs of teachers and disciples that mirror the painting’s main figures, as the teachers in each pair are depicted facing one another. The bottom row is made up of a teaching lineage of the Kagyu tradition.



Usually the lineage figures are shown in the top rows of the painting, but this painting is an exception to this style.

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