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Imagery in Buddhist Art: The Evolution of the Worship of Buddha Vairochana and the Five Buddha Families

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by

Mike Junwei Li

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Introduction

I've always had a great interest in Buddhist art since the time I chose to believe in Tibetan Buddhism at eleven years old. I was extremely fascinated in the *thangkas* and *mandalas* that hung on temple walls. To this day, they attract me with a mysterious beauty; the more I look at them, the more questions I find that need to be answered. While I understood that the geometric shapes, hand gestures, and colors had meanings, I could not comprehend the information within the paintings on the scrolls. The Five Buddha Families *mandala* is one of the most complex and sacred *thangkas*, and this essay will discuss the evolution of this esoteric art theme from the development of Buddha Vairochana into the Five Buddha Families, trying to comprehend the messages within the art.

Tibetan Buddhism is generally categorized as Vajrayana Buddhism, which is the school that many believe to be the fastest to reach enlightenment within this lifetime. To achieve this speed, tantric practice is crucial, and art is an important tool as a guide for the methods of Vajrayana. In addition to the traditional meditation and correction of bad karmas, there are other esoteric practices that help adherents reach enlightenment. One of the many practices of the Vajrayana school is the worship of the Five Buddha Families, which transfers the five "*kleshas*" (earthly desires, more commonly known as the five poisons: greed, anger, foolishness, arrogance,

and doubt[1]) into five Buddhist wisdoms to aid the adherents' path to Buddhahood. Paintings and sculptures of the Five Buddha Families hence serve as guidelines to understanding the nature of life. They are ritual tools to receive empowerment from the deities and to please the eye and soul. For art scholars, the artworks also serve as documentation of the evolution of Vajrayana Buddhism and the worship of the Five Buddha Families.

However, before studying the extremely complex *mandalas* of the Five Buddha Families, we must examine simpler forms since there are too many materials within the *mandala* itself. This essay will first introduce the origin of the Five Buddha Families, the Cosmic Buddha Vairochana, and the paintings and sculptures of him. By starting with the basic form, we will better be able to understand the development of the Five Buddha Families. After a discussion of Vairochana imagery in religious art, its iconography and interpretation, and its relevance to the "fast practice" of Vajrayana, we will shift to analyzing the other four Buddhas in the Buddha Families by looking into similar artworks. This essay also acknowledges the importance of *Gurus* (teachers), as they can decipher and teach the hidden codes within a piece of esoteric art and "release" the full potential power to the viewer without trained eyes and mind. Therefore, I will also introduce an interpretation of the Five Buddha Families practiced by one of the earliest Tibetan Teachers in the Western countries, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1940-1987). Trungpa was famous for his "crazy wisdom," by which he attempted to understand how the worship of the Five Buddha Families could help adherents. When we are familiar with the Five Buddhas,

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[1] "Earthly Desires: Dictionary of Buddhism: Nichiren Buddhism Library." *Earthly Desires | Dictionary of* [1] *Buddhism | Nichiren Buddhism Library*, www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/E/3.

this essay will discuss the role of *mandalas* in Vajrayana practice, and decipher the information within the complex diagram of the universe. Only then will we finally understand how the art of the Five Buddha Families guides the disciples of Vajrayana Buddhism to reach enlightenment.

Chapter I: Buddha Vairochana, the Cosmic Buddha of Vajrayana Buddhism

Since the first century BCE, artists have cast images of the Buddha, the codified image of the enlightened one. Art has helped disciples build faith and connection with the associated deities in aid for their path to enlightenment. However, unlike other religious art in which the artists have some room for interpretation in the appearances of the figures, Buddhist depictions of all Buddhas, whether the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni or not, are subject to specific guidelines within *Sambaddhabhāṣita- pratimālakṣaṇa-vivaranī*[2] Sutra, the scripture dictating the measurements of Buddhist deities. The measurements also apply to Buddha Vairochana, and to the other four Buddhas of the Five Buddha Families that we will discuss later. Therefore, all Buddhas appear with the three iconographic features: the *ushnisha*, which is either the topknot of his hair or the cranial protrusion (a topic debated by different schools of study), the *urna*, a dot that adorns the forehead[3], and elongated earlobes as a result of the heavy earrings worn when Buddha Shakyamuni was the prince. There are also twenty-nine other signs of beauty, forming the *mahā-puruṣa lakṣaṇa* (thirty-two marks of a great man that Buddha Shakyamuni possessed

[2] "Ayurveda Healing Arts Institute - Ayurvedic Distance Learning of Medicine Buddha Healing Center - Https://Ayurveda-Institute.org." *Sambaddhabhashita-Pratimalakshana-Vivarani [Ayurveda Healing Arts Institute - Ayurvedic Distance Learning of Medicine Buddha Healing Center - Https://Ayurveda-Institute.org]*, www.ayurveda-institute.org/ayurvedic-medicine-online-course/doku.php?id=sambaddhabhashita-pratimalakshana-vivarani.

[3] "Item: Buddha - (Vairochana-like Appearance)." Buddha - (Vairochana-like Appearance) (Himalayan Art), www.himalayanart.org/items/610.

according to the 2nd century *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, chapter VII[4]). However, there are many ways to differentiate the historic Buddha from other Buddhas, and hence we must look at more than just the appearance of the body and face, such as the hand gestures (*mudra*), colors, decorations, objects, escorts, etc.

(Figure1) *Pala India, Vairochana*. Northern India. Brass with Silver and Copper Inlay. 8 cm. Private Collection. Unknown Date.

We can distinguish an early Indian depiction of the Cosmic Buddha Vairochana, from the Pala era, India (Figure 1) by the three part crown with ribbons on either side and jewelry around the neck[5]. The appearance of jewelry on deities is unique to Vajrayana Buddhism art, and precious articles are used as ritual objects in tantric rituals. Therefore, many Vajrayana arts have rich and luxurious aesthetics.

[4] Www.wisdomlib.org. "Mahapurushalakshana." Wisdom Library; The Portal for Hinduism, Sanskrit, Buddhism, Jainism, Mesopotamia Etc..., 24 Sept. 2020, www.wisdomlib.org/definition/mahapurushalakshana.

[5] Himalayanbuddhistart. "Pala India, Vairochana." *Himalayan Buddhist Art - Art Bouddhiste De L'Himalaya*, 24 Feb. 2019, himalayanbuddhistart.wordpress.com/2013/12/20/india-pala-period-vairocana/.

The abundant jewelry in this figure style is characteristic of Tibetan Buddhist icons. We can also see the difference by comparing it with a statue of the Historical Buddha (Figure 2) which marks the maturation of the style in India. While this statue from the fifth century of the Gupta era may have the same pose and hand gesture as the Tibetan icon, this statue differs in medium and lacks jewelry. The throne, missing in the Tibetan piece, might have resembled this one with its high back, animal decor, and ornate halo which became standard in later tantric icons.

(Figure 2) *Seated Buddha Preaching First Sermon*. Sarnath, India, Second Half of 5th Century.

Another reason that we need to compare these deities side by side is the close association between Vairochana and Shakyamuni. The link between these two deities becomes clear by looking at the similarities between them. Both Buddhas are seated with legs double crossed (pallaṅka in Pali−the diamond lotus position, the most sacred seating position), and their hands form the teaching gesture (the turning wheel of *dharma* or *dharmachakra mudra*[6]). The hand gesture *mudra* means "seal" in Sanskrit literally. When describing hand gestures, *mudra* indicates the spontaneous natural sentiment or expression of innate pristine awareness[7]. Specifically, the Historical Buddha utilizes the *dharmachakra mudra* in his hand gesture during his first sermon

[6] Beer, Robert. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. Shambala, 2014. Page 152.
[7] Beer, 2014. Page 149.

on the Four Noble Truths at the Deer Park in Sarnath. The fingers and thumbs of both hands form circles that symbolize the wheel of the union of wisdom and methods. The other three fingers on his right hand symbolize the three *yana*, or vehicles, of his teaching, whereas the three fingers on the left hand stand for small, medium, and large capacitie[8]. The three fingers on each hand also represent the Three Jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, *dharma* (the teaching), and *sangha* (the monks). The gesture of this *mudra* leaves the impression that the Buddha is counting during his teaching to help his disciples understand and focus. From here, we can see how the *dharmachakra mudra* is highly associated with the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni. However, why does the same hand seal appear in the depiction of the Cosmic Buddha Vairochana? With this question, we need to look into the Vajrayana understanding of the relation between Vairochana and Shakyamuni.

Even though many specific tantra teachings have their own main deity in Vajrayana Buddhism, Buddha Vairochana (also spelled Vairocana) is arguably the central deity[9] on the general level. Vairocana means "the Luminous One" in Sanskrit[10], and his name has the connotation of the Great Sun−hence, he is known as the "Great Sun Buddha" in China and Japan with the pronunciation of Dàrì Rúlái and Dainichi respectively[11]. The earliest scripture of Vairocana is in the second part of *Brahmajāla Sutra* (*Brahma Net Sutra/Fan Wang Ching*), with Vairocana claiming himself as "the Original Buddha, the precepts are like the radiant sun and

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[8] Beer, 2014. Page 152.
[9] Now, Buddhism. "The Five Buddha Families, by Francesca Fremantle." *Buddhism Now*, 26 Nov. 2013, buddhismnow.com/2013/11/26/five-buddha-families-francesca-fremantle/.
[10] "Vairocana/Mahāvairocana." *Obo*, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0094.xml.
[11] "Vairocana." *Religion*, religion.wikia.org/wiki/Vairocana.

moon[12]," with himself as the original body of multiple Buddha Shakyamuni in 100 Billion worlds[13]. Buddha Vairocana is believed to be the Dharmakāya of Buddha Shakyamuni, which signifies the reality of the Three Body Buddha, a Mahayanist formulation that will be introduced later. Understanding the relation between the two deities necessitates evolving our understanding of the historical Buddha.

In the description in *Brahmajāla Sutra,* there are a thousand flowers around Buddha Vairocana. Each flower supports a hundred million worlds, and in each world appears a Buddha Shakyamuni, with Buddha Vairocana as their original body, preaching to these worlds[14]. Vajrayana Buddhism believes that the Historical Buddha is the incarnation of Buddha Vairochana, and while our world, and many other worlds, were listening to the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, we were linked to Buddha Vairochana's wisdoms and power through the Historical Buddha. Although it is often said in Buddhism to not differentiate deities from deities with a hierarchy thought, we can see that Vairochana is extremely important as he is the origin of Shakyamuni's teaching. Therefore, in many of the following artworks with multiple deities, Vairochana is often placed at the very center of the compositions to show him as the fundamental origin of Buddhism.

Before discussing more complex visions of Vairochana such as a *mandala* of the Five Buddha Families, let us first look at alternative stylistic renderings of Vairochana to trace the

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] *Buddhist Sutra - The Brahma Net Sutra*, www.buddhasutra.com/files/brahmanet.htm.

evolution of his appearance. Figure 3 is a stone carving of crowned Vairochana from the Pala era in India, ca. 9-10th centuries. The gesture, hand *mudras*, and smooth style of the bodies represent the yogic ideal, as there is no articulation of the muscles of the deity and the depiction of the fleshy forms are round and smooth. However, the halo is missing from this statue. The stone carving shows Vairochana seated on a throne with flaming motifs around his head, and two birds at either shoulder. The three smaller deities above are hard to identify due to their size, but they possibly represent Buddha Shakyamuni in *dhyana mudra*, or the meditating hand seal[15]. The deity directly above the central figure in Buddhist art is often closely associated with the central deity. Sometimes a wrathful central figure will have a serene figure at the top; other times, *Gurus* will have images of the deities they embodied. The two standing figures with the long monk robes are likely Buddhas, since their right palms face outward and point down and their left palms face outward but point up, which is a common gesture of Buddha.

(Figure 3) *Vairocana Buddha* Pala-Sena Dynasty, 9th-10th Century. Stone Carved. H x W x D: 40.6 x 27.2 x 9.6 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

[15] Beer, Robert. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. Shambala, 2014. Page 154.

In other examples of Tibetan Thangka art, there are similar depictions of deities above the main theme, near the center top of the composition. We can see that later when we discuss Tibetan *thangkas* and *mandalas.* Above all, both Pala artworks show a consistent portrayal of Buddha Vairochana wearing a crown made from leaves, holding his hands in *dharmachakra mudra*, or the preaching hand gesture, and wearing jewelry around his neck. These iconographical attributes will help us to identify Vairochana in the more complex depictions.

In paintings, color choice is crucial when representing Buddhist deities. Since we cannot identify the color from sculptures and stone carvings that have lost their pigments, let's take a look at this 14th century Western Tibetan painting on cotton on display in the Rubin Museum (Figure 4) Artworks that include multiple deities may not have the precision and detail of a *thangka*, but the raised gold clearly signifies that this was precious. The electronic photo of this artwork does not accurately convey the preciousness of the materials. This is also evidence of the sad truth that everything is doomed to vanish, and colors fade through time. Buddha is seated at the middle of the painting, with four much smaller deities around him: two Bodhisattvas at the left

(Figure 4) *Buddha - (Vairochana-like Appearance)*, Western Tibet, 1300-1399. Raised Gold on Cotton. 25.40x20.32cm. Rubin Museum of Art

and right of the Buddha, and two *gurus* midair at the upper corners of the painting. The white Buddha's facial expression is serene, in opposition to the wrathful appearance, with a mysterious smiling facial gesture. His eyes are half-closed to make him appear gentle and benevolent to the viewer. The other four characters in this painting are secondary in scale and composition. The two figures at the side of Buddha Vairocana appear as Bodhisattvas, one with green skin color and the other withred. The Bodhisattvas' bodies are seated in typical yogic fashion, lacking muscles, and their faces appear Indian. We can see the continuity of Indian Pala Vairochana figures with theTibetan Painting, demonstrating how Vajrayana Buddhism came to Tibet from India. However, the two figures in the top of the painting appear to be *Gurus*—noble teachers of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. Flowers sprout from their fingertips, symbolizing a pleasant blessing. The Gurus are dressed in traditional monk robes worn by Tibetan monks to this day. Furthermore, the color usage is distinctly Tibetan; we can tell that they used vivid mineral pigments that are bright and vibrant,.There is not much use of sombre colors (although there is some color fading, causing the painting to appear duller).

The combination of the Tibetan and Indian elements makes this painting fascinating; it still has traces of the influence of Indian style deities combined with local traditions in Tibet. This Buddha also has the three primary iconographical features: the ushnisha, the urna, the long, pierced earlobes,[16] and gold flowers that decorate the upper tips of the ears. The throne appears to be gold, and although the color has faded, we can still imagine its luxurious appearance. On each side of the throne, one precious jewel (*ratna/mani*) is depicted in a flame motif, which is a

[16] *"Item: Buddha - (Vairochana-like Appearance)."* Buddha - (Vairochana-like Appearance) (Himalayan Art), www.himalayanart.org/items/610.

common decoration on Buddhist thrones. The opulence of the painting is further emphasized by the jewels in his hair. We can again see that the white Buddha is seated in the diamond lotus position, and his hands are in the preaching gesture. Although he is missing a leaf crown and neck jewelry, the decorative flowers in his hair often appear on Vairochana instead of Shakyamuni. Moreover, the throne and flaming halo resemble the stone carving of Vairochana in Pala, India (both have halos and flaming mandorlas, but the flowers in the hair are more apparent) Hence, it is possible to deduce that this deity is Buddha Vairochana.

When the depiction of Vairochana appears in color, the majority of his body will be either white or a very light flesh color. The reason for this color choice stems from descriptions of the Historical Buddha's *laksana* (auspicious mark) of the Historical Buddha whose skin color being so black that it is almost blue, and other sources that describe the skin tone of other deities. The white color perhaps conveys the iconographic symbolism of Vairochana's "infinite illumination." When inspecting the different *mandalas* of the Five Buddha Families, we notice that the center Vairochana and the section representing his realm are always be white.

Another form of Buddha Vairochana that is different from the one with *dharmachakra mudra* is the *Vajradhatu* form of Vairochana. *Vajradhatu* means "diamond realm" in Sanskrit, but when describing Vairochana, it specifically refers to the four-headed form that has eight, four, or two arms[17]. Figure 5 shows a Tibetan bronze statue of *Vajradhatu* Vairochana with his hands in the meditating, or *dhyana mudra*, just like the small Buddha Shakyamuni on the Pala Stone

[17] Www.wisdomlib.org. "Vajradhatu." *Wisdom Library; The Portal for Hinduism, Sanskrit, Buddhism, Jainism, Mesopotamia Etc...*, 2 Sept. 2020, www.wisdomlib.org/definition/vajradhatu.

carving (Figure 2). This statue is even more lavishly decorated than the ones we saw before, partially due to the abundant and rich aesthetic of Tibetan art. *Vajradhatu* Vairochana's iconographical attributes consist not only of a crown and jewelry around his neck, but also beads around his arms and legs. Again, the statue does not retain its original pigment, but *Vajradhatu* Vairochana also appears to be white. The additional three faces may be green, yellow, and red[18]. This form of Buddha Vairochana also appears in *mandalas* and other paintings.

(Figure 5) *Tibet, Vairochana, 4 Faces*. 14th-15th century, Tibet, Vairocana, copper alloy with stone inlay.

Now that we have a general image of the appearance of Buddha Vairochana in the two forms he may take in art, let's look deeper into the role of this deity and how he empowers the adherents of Vajrayana Buddhists. In the Five Buddha Family, Buddha Vairocana acted as the root and foundation of the other four deities. The white Buddha Vairocana in the center of the Five Buddha Family signifies wisdom as the fundamental nature of the universe *dharma-dhātu-svabhāva-jñāna*, and from his wisdom the other four wisdoms derived. The role of Buddha Vairocana's wisdom is to transfer ignorance into knowledge of reality, which is also

[18] Ibid.

related to the Historical Buddha's teaching of dharma for people to understand the nature of karma in this world. As mentioned before, Vajrayana Buddhism holds that the Historical Buddha is the embodiment or incarnation of Vairochana, the Illuminated One. Therefore, the root of Buddhism lies within the power of Vairochana. This also explains why he is the central deity of the Five Buddha Families and his Family is the "Buddha" Buddha Family, which is the origin of the practice of the Five Buddha Families worship.

Part II: The Worship of the Five Buddha Families and The Dhyani Buddhas

Now that we are familiar with Buddha Vairocana, it is important that we analyze the four Buddhas that derived from him known as the Five Buddhas or the Dhyani Buddhas, and how they appear in Vajrayana Buddhist artworks. This part will discuss the appearance, colors, *mudras*, ornaments, and iconography of these four Buddhas. Buddha Ratnasambhava, Akshobya, and Amoghasiddhi are not as widely known as Buddha Amitabha, primarily because these three Buddhas mostly appear in Vajrayana Buddhism, which is esoteric compared to Mahayana Buddhism. Very few orders of Buddhism worship these deities. This part will look into the Tibetan portrayal of these four Buddhas while also acknowledging that Buddha Amitabha may appear differently from the Five Buddha Families. Let us begin by looking at a series of wall paintings of the Five Dhyani Buddhas in the temple of Kangyur Lhakang in Shalu Monastery, Central Southern Tibet (Figures 6-10).

Color is perhaps the most direct iconographical feature that unites the five Buddhas. The Chinese associate colors with the cardinal directions. At the center, Buddha Vairocana appears to be white in accordance with the Five Buddha Families. Buddha Ratnasambhava is yellow, the corresponding color of the *Ratna* Family in the south. However, south is often portrayed at the left side of the center[19], and hence the *Padma* Buddha Family and Buddha Amitabha are

[19] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 128.

displayed in red in the 'west,' at the top of the diagram. North is at the right of the diagram, with *Vajra* Family and Buddha Amoghasiddhi colored green. Finally, blue Buddha Akshobhya of *karma* Family is located on the east side.

(Figure 6-10) *Buddha Vairochana (white), Buddha Amoghashiddi (green), Buddha Akshobhya (blue), Buddha Ratnasambhava (yellow), Buddha Amitabha (red)*. Kangyur Lhakang, Shalu Monastery, Central Southern Tibet, China. Early 14th Century. Wall paintings.

One possible explanation that this cardinal direction is different from ours is that although the five Buddhas do not have a hierarchy, the Mahayanist school of Buddhism regards the west as the most noble cardinal direction because of the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha. Also, it is possible to argue that the colors have iconographical meanings themselves other than indicating the cardinal directions. Yellow is the color of gold, signifying the richness and preciousness of the Ratna Family, or the Jewel Buddha Family. Blue signifies permanence or changelessness, just like the sky is always blue[20]. Red is similar to the color of the lotus flower, which is represented by Buddha Amitabha and his *Padma* (lotus) Family. Green is the color of many plants and lives, and part of Buddha Amoghasiddhi's accomplishment is mental and physical health and vitality. White is pure and noble like the *Buddha* Buddha Family, and it also represents that through Buddha Vairochana, the darkness of ignorance is removed. The significance behind these colors will be discussed in depth in later chapters when we delve into the evolution of *mandalas*.

The next important feature to identify in the Buddhas is their *mudrās*. Buddha Vairocana is often portrayed with *dharmachakra mudra,* but in other works we may see him use the *bodhyangi mudra*[21] (fist of wisdom), which is when the left hand forms the common hand sign of "one" with the index finger and the right hand forms a fist while wrapping the index finger of the left hand. The *dharmachakra mudra* of Buddha set the foundation for the other *mudras*. Buddha Ratnasambhava's right hand is in *varada mudra* (boon-granting) position, which indicates

[20] Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. *The Five Buddha Families and The Eight Consciousnesses*. Namo Buddha Publications. 2013. Glastonbury, CT. Page 9.
[21] Beer, 2014. Page 152.

supreme generosity and accomplishment. This is closely linked to the Ratna Family, as it is a gesture of offering with the palm facing outward and fingers extending down, as if he is granting some precious jewel. In Buddhism, this visual of 'granting' signifies wealth and accomplishment to the audience. Buddha Amitabha is in *dhyana mudra* (meditation) with the two hands forming a bowl shape, the left hand beneath the right. In some cases the *dhyana mudra* is created with only the left hand, but in the Five Buddha Families this *mudra* is most commonly made up of two hands with two thumbs touching each other in representation of the two psychic channels (one red and one white, known as the *bodhichitta*[22]). This *mudra* signifies the union of method and wisdom, *samsara* and nirvana, and the realizations of the conventional and ultimate truths.

What is more, this gesture portrays Buddha Shakyamuni overcoming Mara's temptations, and hence is related to the pure *Padma* (lotus) Buddha Family. Buddha Akshobhya is in *bhumisparsa mudra* (earth touching/witnessing, demon conquering), which is the *mudra* Buddha Shakyamuni had when he reached enlightenment and summoned the goddess of earth, Sthavara, to bear witness to his attainment of enlightenment. The appearance of this *mudra* is straightforward with the right palm facing inward with the middle finger reaching to the ground, and we can see that in this mural painting the blue Buddha's right hand is reaching the farthest that it is almost beyond the lotus throne. This *mudra* is associated with the Karma Family as it symbolizes the accomplishment of enlightenment and the escape from the cycle of *karma* and *samsara*. Finally, Buddha Amoghasiddhi signals in *abhaya mudra* (fearlessness/giving refuge),

[22] Beer, 2014. Page 154.

with one hand facing upwards and outwards in a gentle "fear not" message to the audience. This is associated with the *Vajra* (diamond) Family for its power and indestructibility.

If we compare these mural paintings with the Vairochana painting (Figure 4), there are many similarities and differences. For instance, the general composition is very similar: the main deity sits in the center at a significant hierarchy of scale for the attendants. The thrones are also in similar shapes with small differences in decoration. The layout of secondary deities are also similar on the compositional level, but they vary in quantity. One key difference between the mural paintings in Kangyur Lhakang and the Vairochana painting is the portrayal of the Five Buddha Families in the murals−they are bird-like deities on the tips of their thrones. These deities, also known as the Garuda, have bird wings, beaks, claws, and human bodies and arms and are commonly worshipped. They are fierce guardians of Buddhism that originated in Hinduism. In Tibetan art, the Garuda is the combination of the Indian deity Garuda, the son of Kashyapa and Vinata, and the golden horned eagle *khading* of the Bon religion[23]. This deity is known for tranquilizing poisons as he is often depicted devouring a *naga* king or serpent. The Garuda in the Five Buddha Families appears in five different colors that stand for the five elements: the yellow garuda stands for earth, the white for water, the red for fire, the black for air, and a blue or multicolored shade for space[24]. When depicted alone, the Garuda is often in gold or yellow tones.

[23] Beer, Robert. Page 65-66.
[24] Beer, Robert. Page 66.

By looking at these large murals of the Five Buddhas painted on the wall of the Kangyur Lhakang in the Shalu Monastery, we can clearly see how the colors and *mudras* give shape to their identities. However, perhaps due to a need for consistency of style, the thrones and ornaments are very similar, whereas many other sources suggest these elements are quite different from each other. In addition, the escorts are specific to each Buddha, and they are associated with the Buddha Family and the Buddha Realm. We will look into specific examples later. Nevertheless, the wall painting in Kangyur Lhakang in Central Southern Tibet is a great example of the iconographies of the Five Buddha Families and allows us to observe the forming of the "Families" of the Five Buddhas with their own realm colors, escorts, and garuda guardians.

Let us look at some alternative examples of the individual depictions of the four Buddhas besides Vairochana. Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of Western Paradise, is perhaps the most popular deity. Hence, there are a great many artworks of Buddha Amitabha and his Buddha realm. Amitabha literally means "boundless light," which signifies that Buddha Amitabha's power cannot be stopped as it is boundless[25]. This 18th century painting of Buddha Amitabha and his Western Pure Land. (Figure 11) shows his Buddha realm. It is important to note that his realm will reoccur at the Five Buddha Families *Mandala* in a suggestive way.

Although Buddha Amitabha has a yellow skin tone, red is obviously a major thematic color in his land. We can see that half of Buddha Amitabha's clothes are bright red, and most

[25] Tsony. *The Five Buddha Families. From a teaching given on December 11, 2007 at the School of Arts in Lacot, France*. Bird of Paradise Press, Lexington, Virginia. March 30. 2020. Page 61-66.

(Figure 11) *Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Pure Land (Sukhavati)*. ca. 1700. Central Tibet. Distemper with gold on cloth. Paintings. 56 1/4 × 39 1/2 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 2004.139.

decorations, such as the hanging ornaments, umbrellas, and clothes of other deities appear to be red in contrast with the green color of nature. Also, we can see that upon his meditating *dhyana mudra*, a jar is placed above his hand. The object varies in different paintings, but generally, art of Five Buddha Families depicta the deities holding less objects. We can nevertheless still see that the iconography identifies the main deity as Buddha Amitabha. This painting is extremely rich in detail, but since our main focus is on the Five Buddha Families, we will only focus on the main deity in this painting for now.

Buddha Amitabha is known for his land *Sukhavati*, the Western Paradise, which embodies even the impure souls with karma but with strong faith in Amitabha. The souls temporarily live in the lotus buds in the ponds. Because the Western Paradise lacks obstacles and

is under the empowerment of Buddha Amitabha, the impure souls are quickly purified[26] and the buds bloom so that the souls can enter the Buddha realm. In the case of the Five Buddha Families, the Western Paradise is often placed at the top section in red as a geometrical shape. But by looking at this detailed painting of the Western Paradise, we can get a better sense of the realm of the Buddhas.

(Figure 12) *Buddha Akshobhya*. Central Tibet, 15th century. Gilt copper alloy with inset turquoise, garnets, and lapis, and powdered blue lapis pigment in the hair. Zhiguan Museum of Art.

This is a beautifully made, gilt, copper sculpture of Buddha Akshobhya from the 15th century in the typical Tibetan style (Figure 12). Precious stones and gems are inlaid as decorations on his garment. The turquoise gives a rich, greenish-blue accent to the sculpture, and the powdered lapis on the hair covers his head in a solemn and noble dark blue. The entire statue is decorated with natural pigments, and hence the beautiful color has survived the years. The contours of the well-formed yogic body are smooth, and as it is a Buddha it demonstrates the thirty-two signs of great man. The statue is hollowed inside, and the inner space is often filled with scriptures, herbal medicines, crops, incense, and precious

[26] Metmuseum.org, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/72419.

gemstones. The materials are placed in the bottom of the base which is sealed afterwards. This process is known as "zhuāng-zàng" in Chinese, which is the ceremony of concealing special spiritual objects and consecrating the statue. Hence, the statue will be empowered by the deity to act as a channel between the power of Buddha and the adherent, which is the key function for Buddhist art.

Again, we can identify this deity easily with the ert-touching *bhumisparsa mudra*, even though the blue color of Akshobhya is not found on the copper statue. Also, as the left hand forms half of a meditating *dhyana mudra*, a bowl or jar is held in the palm just like in Amitabha's painting (Figure 11). While the halo and other decorations are unfortunately missing, we can see the holes where they were once attached, or else there will be much more decorations for us to discuss on Akshobhya. The name of Akshobhya means "the unshakable," which refers to the precision and sharpness of the mind[27] to not be shaken by one's surroundings. Buddha Akshobhya's realm is Ngonpargawa Pure Land[28], but it is rarely depicted in art compared with Amitabha's Western Paradise.

We will now move on to Buddha Ratnasambhava, The Buddha of Source of All Jewels[29]. There are two artworks of this deity currently displayed at the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art. Buddha Ratnasambhava is associated with wealth and treasure, which we can instantly get a sense of from the gold and yellow color theme of his Buddha Family. This painting of Buddha

[27] Tsony. Page 49.
[28] Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. *The Five Buddha Families and The Eight Consciousnesses*. Namo Buddha Publications. 2013. Glastonbury, CT. Page 2.
[29] Tsony. Page 55.

(Figure 13) *Buddha Ratnasambhava with Wealth Deities*. Tibet, early to mid-14th century. Pigments on cloth. Rubin Museum of Art.

Ratnasambhava and the Wealth Deities (Figure 13) is a great example of Buddha Ratnasambhava's family. We can see that the Buddha and the surrounding deities are adorned with an abundance of jewelry, which signifies not only the material wealth of our world, but also the merit and preciousness of Buddhism. All the secondary deities, besides the seven at the bottom of the composition and two *gurus* beside the lotus throne, direct the audience's attention to the main deity, which is Buddha Ratnasambhava with his boon-granting hand gesture, the *varada mudra*. We can almost feel that the deity is interacting with the viewers.

This sense of interaction with the audience is also felt with the sculpture of Buddha Ratnasambhava (Figure 14). Although faded from time, we can imagine the glorious yellow or gold body of this deity, a benevolent face, and his gentle gesture of boon giving. On top of that, when considering the ceremonial contents of the statue, this Buddhist artwork would link the spiritual world of the adherent to the Buddha realm of Ratnasambhava. In the case of the Five

Buddha Families, Buddha Ratnasambhava is associated with eliminating discrimination between the rich and poor in favor of a universal wealth that is higher and humbler[30] .

(Figure 14) *Buddha Ratnasambhava*. Central Tibet. 13th century. Brass with traces of pigments. Rubin Museum of Art.

Finally we come to the green Buddha Amoghashiddi, which means The Buddha of Unfailing Power. He is responsible for unwavering accomplishment on the path of Buddhism. He often appears with the Five Buddha Families, and there are not many artworks depicting him alone. It is possible to argue that some of the Five Buddhas are more popular than the other ones. For instance, Buddha Vairochana is crucial to Vajrayana Buddhism as the original Cosmic Buddha, and Buddha Amitabha is famous for his Western Paradise. Wealth deities, such as Buddha Ratnasambhava, are always popular among esoteric schools. Therefore, they appear more frequently in art. Hence, we will discuss the arts of Buddha Amoghashiddi in later paragraphs along with the Five Buddha Families.

[30] Tsony. Page 55.

Now that we've seen some examples of artworks of the Five Buddha Families to visualize the individual deities, we need to dig deeper into the concept of the Five Buddha Families. What are the five families? In what ways do worshipping these deities help the adherents? Because the worship of the Five Buddha Families is an esoteric practice, let us look at some of the teachings of Tibetan Buddhist practice and the role of the *Guru*, the teacher of esoteric Buddhism. An excellent primary source on this concept is Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in his book, *Orderly Chaos, The Mandala Principle*[31]. Rinpoche records his esoteric teachings on the reading of *mandalas*, including the Five Buddha Families. It is worthwhile to note that looking into one specific teaching of a *guru* may be academically inaccurate, that it is his personal interpretation which may differ from other schools or orders. However, one key feature of Vajrayana Buddhism is the importance of teachers. This branch of Buddhism is hard to comprehend, making the teaching and guidance of *gurus* crucial to the practice. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche is one of the earliest Tibetan *gurus* who went to the western world to spread Buddhism, and he is known for his "crazy wisdom" and therefore holds a solid credibility. Secondly, even though some teachings may be different from others, they do not necessarily contradict each other. The *Bhadrakalpika Sutra* states that there are eighty-four thousand approaches to enlightenment (famén), and the different approaches are due to the different foundations and characteristics of the adherents. Therefore, we cannot say one interpretation is "right" or "wrong."

[31] Trungpa, Chogyam. *Orderly Chaos: the Mandala Principle*. Shambhala, 1991.

Let us look into Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's teaching on the Five Buddha Families. The Five Buddha Families are *Buddha*, *Ratna* (jewel), *Padna* (lotus), *Karma*, and *Vajra* (diamond). The corresponding Buddhas for these families in the respective order are Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Akshobya, and Amoghasiddhi Buddha. The latter four Buddhas are believed to be derived from Buddha Vairocana. The *Buddha* Buddha Family is the most basic of all, exemplifies the wisdom of all-pervasive space, and brings a sense of solidity, basic being, openness, wisdom, and sanity at the same time[32]. This means that the *Buddha* Buddha Family stands for understanding the reality of our world, which is similar to Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings on the Four Noble Truths and other observations of this world. Hence, the corresponding Buddha wisdom for Vairocana is the fundamental nature of the universe (wisdom of dharmadhatu, *dharma-dhātu-svabhāva-jñāna*[33]).

After the *Buddha* Buddha Family, we move on to the next family, the *Ratna* Family. *Ratna* means "jewels" in Sanskrit, which is not about treasures and jewelry but about the experience of feeling. This Buddha Family is related to an intelligent expansiveness that reaches out to its surroundings like "tentacles[34]." This connection of feelings links to the wisdom of Buddha Ratnasambhava (Jewel-birthing[35] Buddha) that transforms pride into an intuition of equality (wisdom of equality, *samatā-jñāna*[36]). From these feelings, we move on to impulse,

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[32] Trungpa, Chogyam. *Orderly Chaos: the Mandala Principle*. Shambhala, 1991. Page 148.
[33] "Wisdom of Dharmadhatu." *Wisdom of Dharmadhatu - Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia*, chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Wisdom_of_dharmadhatu.
[34] Trungpa, Chogyam. Page 148.
[35] *Sanskrit Dictionary*, sanskritdictionary.com/?q=sambhava.
[36] "Wisdom of Equality." *Wisdom of Equality - Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia*, chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Wisdom_of_equality.

which is related to the *Padma* Family. The impulses are sharp and quick, but at the same time they seduce the connection to the outer world. Even in an awakened state, there is an impulse and willingness to communicate to the surrounding world[37]. The Buddha for the *Padma* Family is Buddha Amitabha (Buddha of Infinite Light), who is very famous in Mahayana Buddhism as the Buddha of the Western Pure Land (Western Paradise). In the Five Buddha Families, he is responsible for transforming lust into insight with his wisdom of discernment (*pratyavekṣanā-jñāna*), making clear the connection between impulse and lust for the *Padma* Buddha Family. From impulses we move on to cognition and state of being, which is related to the *Karma* Family and Buddha Akshobya (The Unshakeable), whose mirror-like wisdom (*ādarśa-jñāna*) reflects those concepts in mind and brings negative emotions such as hatred into wisdom. The last Buddha family is the *Vajra* Family, which is associated with consciousness. The consciousness of this family brings intelligence and clarity, and hence everything became very workable[38]. The last Buddha is Buddha Amoghasiddhi (Buddha of Infallible Success) with his all-accomplishing wisdom (*kṛtyānuṣṭhāna-jñāna*). Through him, frustration is transformed into success. This is the process of meditating using the worship of the Five Buddha Families that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught his adherents. The five wisdoms are closely associated with *skandha*, which are the five functions or aspects that constitute a human being[39]. Those five aspects are basic forms, feelings, impulses, cognition, and consciousness, which are associated with the wisdoms of the Five Buddha Families as the previous teaching stated.

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[37] Trungpa, Chogyam. Page 148.
[38] Trungpa, Chogyam. Page 149.
[39] "Skandha." *Skandha - Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia*, www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Skandha.

Nonetheless, this teaching may still be too esoteric, and in order to more deeply understand it we need to break down how the wisdoms represented by the Five Dhyani Buddhas help remove the five *kleshas* (the five poisons, or disturbing emotions and sources of bad karma). For this topic, another teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche[40], offers a clear explanation. According to Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Buddha Vairochana is responsible for removing the *klesha* ignorance. It is possible to say that just like Buddha Vairochana is the origin of the other four Buddhas, ignorance is the origin of all *kleshas*. We only have anger, desire, pride, and jealousy when we are ignorant, which prohibit us from acknowledging the ultimate truth and reality of the world. For instance, many bad experiences, such as wrathfully arguing with another person, serve a meaningless purpose when we recall them. They appear as futile endeavors once we longer care or are able to see the issue from another point of view. Desire faces a similar futility in Buddhism, as everything will eventually perish and no matter how much we desire luxurious jewelry or clothing, material goods cannot follow us to the next life or help us to be enlightened. Therefore, Buddha Vairochana's wisdom of *dharmadhatu* is to bring us to the highest level to overcome ignorance.

From Buddha Vairochana's wisdom of *dharmadhatu*, we move to Buddha Ratnasambhava's wisdom of equality. This is straightforward as this wisdom removes ego, pride, and arrogance, which are all negative emotions that instill a false sense of superiority. Someone with a mind for equality would hence not suffer the *klesha* of pride. The next wisdom is Buddha Amitabha's wisdom of discernment, which purifies desire and lust by helping us discern that

[40] Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. *The Five Buddha Families and The Eight Consciousnesses*. Namo Buddha Publications. 2013. Glastonbury, CT. Page 2-9.

desire will lead to dissatisfaction and pain. The next wisdom is Buddha Akshobhya's mirror-like wisdom that tranquilizes anger. When we feel angry, it is a reflection of the state of our minds just as mirrors reflect objects . The source of our frustration is both the phenomena and our mind, and by realizing this with mirror-like wisdom, we can detach ourselves from the negative emotion of anger. Finally, Buddha Amoghasiddhi's all-accomplishing wisdom conquers the *klesha* of jealousy, which is often a jealousy of others' possessions that stops us from reaching our own success. Up to this point, the five poisons that bring bad karmas are all transferred into wisdoms to practice Buddhism.

From these teachings, we can understand how the Five Buddhas help the adherents on all five bases that constitute human beings by transferring the five *kleshas* into wisdoms that will help the worshippers achieve enlightenment at an advanced speed. This is the fundamental theory of the practice of the Five Buddha Families, or the Dhyani Buddhas. Now that we understand the function of the five wisdoms of the Dhyani Buddhas, the imagery of these deities, whether through paintings or sculptures, becomes more meaningful and powerful.

Part III: The Five Buddha *Mandala*

Now that it is clear how the worship of the Five Buddha Families helps one reach enlightenment, let us move to the final form of art of the Five Buddha Families, which is the *mandala* of the Five Buddhas. Here, the term "final" does not imply that the *mandala* is better than sculptures or paintings, but rather it is the final product of the evolution of the arts of the Five Buddhas. In the previous chapters, we saw how Buddha Vairochana's figure was developed from the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni and the formation of the Dhyani Buddhas. The *mandala* of the Five Buddha Families is a combination of the Five Dhyani Buddhas and many other deities within their families. However, *mandalas* include much more information, such as the cosmic view of Vajrayana Buddhism within the geometric diagram. This part will introduce the *mandala*, explain the characteristics and overall significance of the *mandala* for the Five Buddha Families, and dig deeper into the messages and iconographies it conveys.

Let us take a look at a Five Buddha Families *Mandala* first and then discuss the structure of the *mandala*. This *Mandala of Vairochana Buddha* (Figure. 15) on display in the Rubin Museum of Art is a typical example of the Five Buddha Families *mandala*. The general composition of this mandala is in the most common form, with two layers of squares inside a large circle that is filling up the width of the rectangular outline of the whole painting. In the very center of the smallest square of the mandala is the central deity Vairochana and the other deities derived from him. The white Buddha is miniature in comparison to the great many deities

surrounding the diagram. Meditating in the smallest white square, Buddha Vairocana appears differently than he did in the previous painting (Figure 4), having four heads and four hands, with two arms bending upwards and the other two arms forming the "space *mudra*[41]" in front of the belly. Around him are the remaining four Buddhas in the Five Buddha Family, identified by their iconological colors (red, blue, green, and yellow) and arranged in cardinal directions, with west at the top of the mandala.

(Figure. 15) *Mandala of Vairochana Buddha - Sarvavid (Sarvadurgati Tantra)* ཀུན་རིག་རྡོམ་པར་སྣང་མཛད། Tibet. 1600 - 1699. Sakya. 88.90x69.85cm (35x27.50in). Ground Mineral Pigment on Cotton. Rubin Museum of Art. acc.# P1998.28.4

[41] Wayman, Alex, and Ryujun Tajima. *The Enlightenment of Vairocana*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1998. Preface.

Once again, the four Buddhas at the four cardinal directions are red Buddha Amitabha in the west, blue Buddha Akshobhya in the east, green Buddha Amoghasiddhi in the north, and yellow Buddha Ratnasambhava (also known as Padmasambhavatathāgata[42]) in the south. However, when looking more closely at the painting, we can see that Buddha Amitabha and Akshobhya are yellow-skinned, and Buddha Ratnasambhava is blue-skinned. This may be different from the color iconographies introduced in previous chapters. It is important to note, though, that the appearances of Buddhist deities are not canonically tied to one specific aesthetic. For instance, Buddha Amitabha in the Western Paradise (Figure 11) is portrayed in yellow but dressed in red robes. In this *mandala*, we can also see that Buddha Amitabha, Akshobhya, and Ratnasambhava are dressed in the color of their respective Buddha Family, and Buddha Amoghasiddhi remains in green skin color. However, generally speaking, the sections in the iconographical colors are to be suggestive depictions of their Buddha Realms. Although Buddha Amitabha of the Western Paradise (Figure 11) does not have much detail, the red triangle shape suggests his realm in a geometric and abstract way.

From the Buddhas and their color palettes we can see that the square has been divided into four triangular sections, each including many deities. Between these four Buddhas that derived from Buddha Vairocana are the four Buddha consorts, Locana (consort of Buddha Ratnasambhava), Mamaki (consort of Buddha Akshobhya), Pandara (consort of Buddha Amitabha) and Green Tara (consort of Buddha Amoghasiddhi, also known as Damtshig Drolma)

[42] *"[佛]* 五方佛坐像*." (Five Buddha Seated Sculptures)* 佛圖網, www.photobuddha.net/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=10544.

[4344]. They are well-ornamented with jewelry and luxurious clothing. Perhaps due to the limitation of the nine-grid composition, Buddha Vairochana's consort, Vajradhatvisvari (white tara[45]), is not depicted. In between the small square and the large square are another sixty deities in two rows, with the same mini scale with Buddha Vairochana and other deities. All the deities are front facing and seated upright in the diamond lotus position. Another significant detail is that each of the Dhyani Buddhas have their Bodhisattvas. The symmetry of the diagram and the symmetry of the deities are very structural, and the deities' arrangement is geometrical, almost in a mathematical way. Painted between the large circle and the large square are deities depicted in various motions and precious jewels on vases. Because of the size of the painting, it is difficult to identify these deities.

The viewer looks upon the contents of the circle with a bird's-eye perspective of the cardinal directions, with west being at the top of the diagram. However, the perspective of everything outside the circle diagram shifts to a more ground's-eye view. The deities above the circle appear at the top, and the deities at the bottom appear lower. At the bottom, we see four wrathful deities and some monks in red hats. The demonic presentations of the wrathful deities are meant not to scare off the audience, but to overpower demons and bad karmas. In most circumstances, the wrathful deities are protectors of Buddhism, and hence their importance is less significant than the deities at the top, with the center one being Buddha Shakyamuni,

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[43] "Item: Mandala of Vairochana Buddha - Sarvavid (Sarvadurgati Tantra)." *Mandala of Vairochana Buddha - Sarvavid (Sarvadurgati Tantra) (Himalayan Art)*, www.himalayanart.org/items/773.

[44] Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. *The Five Buddha Families and The Eight Consciousnesses*. Namo Buddha Publications. 2013. Glastonbury, CT. Page 2-10).

[45] Harderwijk, Rudy. *Symbolism of the Five Dhyani Buddhas*, viewonbuddhism.org/5_dhyani_buddhas.html.

identified by both the *pātra* (bowl) in his left hand above his legs in diamond lotus seating position and the right hand in *bhumisparsha mudra*[46] (ground-touching/earth witness of Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment under the bodhi tree).

Let us also look at the basic principles of the *mandala*, a design which conveys significant iconographic meanings and messages in Vajrayana Buddhism. The term *mandala* literally means "circle" in Sanskrit, or, more specifically, a sacred circular diagram. *Mandalas* in Tantric Buddhism represent the Buddhist worldview and cosmology, which can be dissected into two parts: a theory of the five elements of the physical world and a world system in which Mount Meru (Mount Sumeru) is at the center[47]. We can see this on the Five Buddha Families *mandala* where Vairochana is at center, signifying him as the most important element in the diagram, just like Mount Meru in the universe. There are five realms representing the Five Buddha Families, five Buddha wisdoms, five *skandhas* (parts that construct a human being), and five *kleshas* (sources of pain and bad karma).

The five sections of the *mandala*, including the smallest square in the middle and the four trapezoid sections around it, also represent the five elements in coordination with the five senses, organs, and physical aspects of the body. The white square at the center of Buddha Vairochana and the *Buddha* Family represents the element of space, sight, the heart, and the energy channels in the human body. The blue section of Buddha Akshobhya and the *Vajra* Family represents

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[46] Beer, Robert. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. Shambala, 2014. Page 154

[47] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 245.

water, sound, the kidneys, and blood flow. The yellow section of Buddha Ratnasambhava and the *Ratna* Family is emblematic of earth, smell, the spleen, and flesh. The red section of Buddha Amitabha and the *Padma* Family marks fire, taste, the liver, and body heat. The green section of Buddha Amoghasiddhi represents air, touch, the lungs, and inner winds. A prime reason as to why Tibetan Buddhists are not allowed to have tattoos on their body is because it will damage the *mandala* body of a converted adherent. The *mandala* represents the material world with the five elements that construct it, along with illustrating the elements that construct our body with the corresponding organs and feelings. Not only does this correlation apply to the *mandala* of the Five Buddha Families, but also to the many forms of *mandalas* with different main deities and secondary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The *mandala* serves as a psychogram as well as a cosmogram[48]. The purpose of it is to aid the meditation of the practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism. Therefore, we see that a *mandala* is a common theme on *thangkas*, which are Tibetan scroll paintings that can be easily rolled up and traveled with. On *thangkas,* blessings empowered by the *mandalas* can travel with the nomadic people of Tibet and Mongolia. The layers of the *mandala* represents the mind, speech, and body of Buddha[49]. The body is on the outside of the design and the mind rests around the center, where the wheel of great bliss turns. In some cases, the layers also represent *Karmadhatu*, *Rupadhatu*, and *Arupadhatu* (the Realm of Desire, the Realm of Form, and the Realm of

[48] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 245.
[49] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 251.

Formlessness[50]). They present in the ascending order of reaching enlightenment. Us humans reside in the world of desire, and by freeing ourselves from desire and attachment to form, we can reach the spiritual formlessness of enlightenment. These are some elements of this iconography that appear in the Five Buddha Families *mandala*. Many *mandalas* that originated in India and Nepal were best preserved in Tibet[51] where Vajrayana Buddhism thrived. Each type of mandala has a different arrangement of deities and iconographical details as their primary goal is to serve the respective deity that brings wisdom and power to the viewer. Despite these differences, they fall into the same general composition.

Like most *mandalas*, the Mandala of Vairochana Buddha also consists of eight "T-shaped" doorways with two gateways on each cardinal direction, joining the smaller square to the larger one, and finally to the outer circle of the diagram. These doorways are drawn to be symbolic rather than accurate portrayals of actual doorways and are painted with the five colors of the five Buddhas. Also, at each end of the doorway, half of a *vajra* (a powerful symbol of the esoteric doctrine of the Buddha Tantrism, which often referred to a powerful weapon in Tantric Buddhism for its unbreakable diamond-like nature and might of a thunderbolt) is painted, and the four ends form a cross *vajra*. In total, there are thirty-seven deities, but the diagram contains far more characters, creating a cosmic system filled with different deities and their realms and inhabitants.

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[50] "World of Formlessness: Dictionary of Buddhism: Nichiren Buddhism Library." *World of Formlessness | Dictionary of Buddhism | Nichiren Buddhism Library*, www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/W/54.

[51] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 1.

Let us look at another beautiful *mandala* of the Five Buddha Families. Housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the *Vajradhatu Mandala* (Figure 16) shares many similarities with the one in the Rubin Museum (Figure 15), but it is much richer in detail. We can see that the color schemes, major deities, *vajra* gateways, etc. are all quite similar, but this *mandala* contains more objects between the square and outer circle. There appears to be treasure vases, precious jewels, and flower offerings, among other fine things. The architecture of the gateways is also more complex and realistically drawn. By the

(Figure 16) *Vajradhatu (Diamond Realm) Mandala*. 14th Century. Central Tibet. Gold and Distemper on cloth. 29 1/2 in. × 36 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

mudra of the fist of wisdom, we can identify the four-armed Vairochana at the center as *Vajradhatu* Vairochana, a common form in the Five Buddha Families *mandala*. The deities outside the large circle appear very differently from those seen in Figure 15. To start: there is no Buddha at the center above the circle, and there are no wrathful deities. However, these are not the elements that determine the core purpose of this diagram, which is to transfer *kleshas* into wisdoms. What *is* important is that all the elements for the practitioners to meditate and transform the five poisons as they strive toward enlightenment are present.

The final *mandala* painting this essay will discuss is a bit unusual. *Four Mandalas of the Vajravali Cycle* (Figure 17) consists of four *mandalas* in one painting, which is quite rare. We can immediately see that the top left one is the *Vajradhatu mandala* from the Dhyani Buddhas by its corresponding color sections. The other three, however, are quite different from any of the *mandalas* we've discussed before. The bottom left one is called *Kālacakratantra*[52] *mandala*, another form of the Five Buddha Families, but with the blue Buddha Akshobhya at the center, Buddha Vairochana at the top (west cardinal direction), Buddha Amitabha in the north, Buddha Amoghasiddhi to the south, and Buddha Ratnasambhava at east. Notice that this bottom left *mandala* is the only one out of the four that has differently patterned triangle colors inside the square. Instead of blue, the bottom triangle is white − still in line with the five color themes of the Five Buddha Families, just in a different order.

[52] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 229.

(Figure 17) *Four Mandalas of the Vajravali Cycle*. Wangguli and five other Newar artists (active mid-15th century). Ngor Ewam Choden Monastery, Tsang Province, Central Tibet. ca. 1429-1456. Pigments on cloth Rubin Museum of Art, New York.

In some other cases when Buddha Akshobhya is at the center, the east direction will be in black. Also, it is likely that if the *Kālacakratantra mandala* is confused with *Highest Yoga Tantras Mandala* because they all will have Buddha Akshobhya at the center. The key difference is the position of Vairochana, for in the *Highest Yoga Tantras Mandala* Buddha Vairochana is at the bottom. This arrangement is a transposition with Buddha Akshobhya in the *Vajradhatu mandala*. Furthermore, it is possible that Buddha Amitabha is at the center of the *Kālacakratantra mandala*[53], but in this case the central deity is Akshobhya. It is reasonable to believe, then, that the primary message of this *Kālacakratantra mandala* is Buddha Akshobhya's unshakable accomplishment enabling the practitioner to acquire good karma and practice the dharma to reach *avaivartika*, the non-regression stage of Buddhist practice[54].

Equally important, the composition of the deities inside the circle is similar for the *Vajradhatu* and the *Kālacakratantra mandala* in that they are in the "nine-panel grid" format with the Five Buddhas and four consorts. However, there are two more general configurations of deities in the inner circle of a *mandala* which appear in the other two *mandalas* of the *Four Mandalas of the Vajravali Cycle*. The top right one is in an "eight-petaled lotus[55]" composition with one deity at the center on the pericarp of the lotus and eight deities or attendants[56] evenly distributed like petals of a lotus flower. The lotus flower is one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism, and it represents purity because the flower grows from mud but remains clean.

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[53] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 270-271.
[54] "Avaivartika: Dictionary of Buddhism: Nichiren Buddhism Library." *Avaivartika | Dictionary of Buddhism | Nichiren Buddhism Library*, www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/A/119.
[55] Tanaka, Kimiaki. *An Illustrated History of the maṇḍala from Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*. Wisdom Publications, 2018. Page 270-271.
[56] Ibid.

This emblem of purity represents the sacred beauty and transcendental wisdom that one can reach in enlightenment from ignorance—and light from darkness[57]. In this case, we can see the yellow-skinned Buddha Shakyamuni in the *dharmachakra mudra* in the top-right *mandala*, turning our focus to the Historical Buddha and his teaching. Although Vajrayana Buddhism regards Buddha Vairochana as the most important deity, Buddha Shakyamuni is the one who brought Buddhism to our world. Thus he has significance in Vajrayana Buddhism. Therefore, the composition of the top-right *mandala* centered on Shakyamuni at the pericarp shows the importance of the Historical Buddha as the source of the other eight Buddhas, some of whom, according to their skin color, we can identify as the Dhyani Buddhas.

In the bottom right *mandala* is the "eight-spoked wheel", which is quite similar to the "eight-petaled lotus", but without lotus pedals. The deities are placed along the eight cardinal directions represented by the eight-spoked wheel, or *dharmacakra*—the Dharma Wheel. The *dharmacakra* is also one of the eight auspicious emblems of Buddhism and an important symbol in Buddhism. It conveys significant iconographic meanings: the wheel itself represents a cycle—a cycle of *samsara* (birth, death, and rebirth), or the Four States of Phenomena in the Principle of Physics of Buddhism: formation, existence, destruction, and emptiness[58]. However, the wheel also represents the tool of progression on the path to enlightenment, represented in the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism. The wheels of the dharma are the key components for the vehicle to progress. The eight spokes represent the spread of Buddhism to

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[57] Henss, Michael, and Loden Sherap. Dagyab. *Buddhist Ritual Art of Tibet: a Handbook on Ceremonial Objects and Ritual Furnishings in the Tibetan Temple*. Arnoldsche, 2020. Page 54.
[58] Uchiron. 浴佛語彙*(*中英對照*) (Bathing Buddha Chinese-English Translation)*, 1 Jan. 1970, tcflt.blogspot.com/2014/05/blog-post.html.

every direction in our world, while also reminding the viewer of the eightfold path teaching of Buddha Shakyamuni. In addition, it is also the symbol of Buddha's first sermon[59]. At the center of the bottom right of the *mandala* is a deity with four arms and a bow in hand who may be a wrathful deity guarding all four *mandalas* in this painting. As wisdom is important in Buddhism conveyed by the other three *mandalas*, the bottom right *mandala* represents the force and strength of the tantric Buddhism.

Together, these four *mandalas* are the combination of a four-fold blessing from the Dhyani Buddhas, just like the name of this *mandala*, the *vajravali cycle*, suggests. In Sanskrit, *Vajravali* means the "grand synthesis of tantric liturgy[60]." We can see how the Five Dhyani Buddhas and the deities that are closely related to them (the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the wrathful deities, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas) appear in Vajrayana art. In sum, the *Four Mandalas of Vajravali Cycle* is a great example of how the tantric power of the Five Buddha Families transfers to the viewer by means of complex coded diagrams.

The final example of esoteric art representing the Five Buddha Family is the ninth century Borobudur Stupa in Central Java. At first, this monument does not seem relevant to this project that discusses mainly Indian and Tibetan esoteric artworks. However, it demonstrates a great many similarities with the *mandalas* of the Five Buddha Family *mandala* of Vajrayana Buddhism that we've seen previously. Indeed, Borobudur is the largest Five Buddha Family

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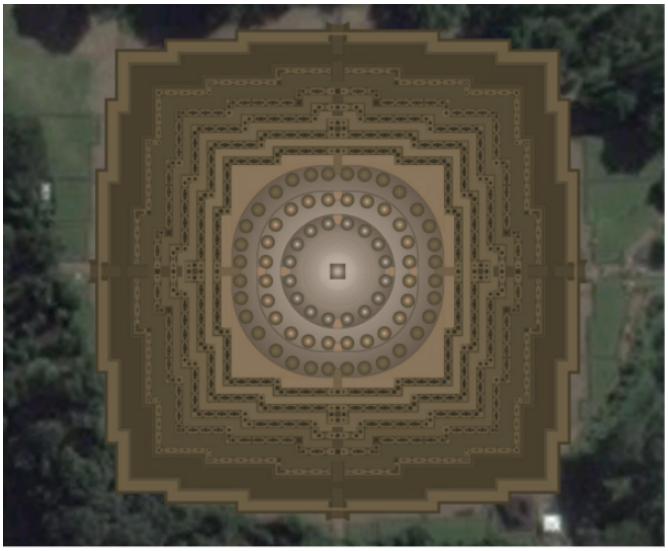
[59] Henss, Michael, and Loden Sherap. Dagyab. *Buddhist Ritual Art of Tibet: a Handbook on Ceremonial Objects and Ritual Furnishings in the Tibetan Temple*. Arnoldsche, 2020. Page 56.
[60] Www.wisdomlib.org. "Vajravali." *Wisdom Library; The Portal for Hinduism, Sanskrit, Buddhism, Jainism, Mesopotamia Etc...*, 13 Sept. 2020, www.wisdomlib.org/definition/vajravali.

Buddhist complex in the world. The ancient temple of Borobudur was built over the centuries and finalized in the ninth century during the reign of the Sailendra Dynasty, but it quickly sank into the soft soil of Central Java and was only rediscovered in the early 20th century[61]. The complex is regarded as a *stūpa* containing Buddhist relics as well as a multi-storied palace, a model of sacred Mount Meru, and a *Vajradhatu mandala*[62]. There is a clear relationship between Mount Meru and the *mandala*, as the cosmic diagram places Mount Meru at the center of the universe. The hill-like architecture resembles the often hour-glass shape of the cosmic mountain. At the very center is a large bell-shaped *stūpa* that contains an empty room for holding the relics. However, there were no relics found inside the hollowed room. This is perhaps due to the short time that Borobudur was used or because of other causes such as theft. Nevertheless, even though Borobudur no longer functions as a *stūpa*, its design as a *mandala* is sacred.



(Figure 18) *Borobudur Plan*. Drawing by Swati Chenbukar.

Looking at the ground plan of Borobudur (Figure 18)[63], we can immediately see how it resembles a *mandala* with circles inscribed within

[61] Voûte, Caesar. "The Restoration and Conservation Project of Borobudur Temple, Indonesia. Planning: Research: Design." *Studies in Conservation*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1973, pp. 113–130. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1505654. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021. Page 113.
[62] Chemburkar, Swati. *Stūpa to Maṇḍala: Tracing a Buddhist Architectural Development from Kesariya to Borobudur to Tabo*. 2018, Pacific World, Third Series, No. 20. Page 197.
[63] Chemburkar, Swati. *Stūpa to Maṇḍala: Tracing a Buddhist Architectural Development from Kesariya to Borobudur to Tabo*. 2018, Pacific World, Third Series, No. 20. Page 197.

side squares. Notice the inner three rings of circles, which are three tiers of smaller *stūpas* around the central large one. Inside each small *stūpa* is a statue of Buddha Vairochana in *dharmachakra mudra* (Figure 19). There are a total of seventy-two Vairochana *stūpas* at Borobudur. The outer thirty-two *stūpas* have diamond-shaped holes that refer to the diamond-like stability of Buddhism. The twenty-four mid-level *stūpas* have square holes that represent the four cardinal directions along with the other iconographical associations such as the Four Noble Truths. The sixteen stupas on the inner level have no holes, symbolizing the perfectibility of Buddhism. The outer *stūpa* on the northern and southern sides is missing and the stone carved sculpture of Buddha Vairochana is visible. The square terraces have a total of four hundred and thirty-two Buddha statues seated on each of its four sides with one hundred and eight statues facing each cardinal direction[64]. The statues are identified as Buddha Amitabha at the west, Buddha Akshobhya at the east, Buddha Ratnasambhava at the south, and Buddha Amoghasiddhi at the north with their corresponding *mudras* and attributes discussed earlier. These deities and their placements in this complex architectural design create a *Vajradhatu mandala* come-to-life.

(Figure 19) One of the two revealed Buddha Vairochana sculpture inside the smaller *stūpas* of Borobudur. Author's own photo.

[64] Snellgrove, David L. *Buddha Families and Mandala.* (2004) Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, null Orchid Press. Page 189-213.

To physically engage with the *mandala* as a three dimensional architecture in Borobudur is crucial to the comprehension of this Buddhist site. In January 2020, I visited Borobudur and immersed myself into this real-world *Vajradhatu mandala*. The experience of traveling from the bottom to the top through the gateways (Figure 20) was very similar to the layout in the painting. The religious meaning of this "journey" is to reach enlightenment through the blessed place by the Five Dhyani Buddhas. By climbing and circling around the architecture, one can gain much blessings. However, by only understanding the iconographic meanings of the design of Borobudur, one can acquire the full empowerment of the esoteric Five Buddha Families.

(Figure 20) Doorways of Borobudur. Author's own photo.

The bottom tiers represent *dharmadhatu*, which is the world of desire we live in. The reliefs carved on these tiers are observations of our world made up of animals, nature, humans, and human actions such as reproduction, war, and anything associated with the world of desire. The next level is *rupadhatu*, the world of forms. The reliefs on this level carve the story of the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni and his path to enlightenment, as well as detailing other famous Buddhist stories. There are no desires in this

world, but forms and materials still persist. Finally, when we reach the circular tiers, where there are no reliefs but only *stūpas* and Buddha statues, we have arrived at the highest stage of *arupadhatu*, and the world of formlessness embraces us. This is the stage of enlightenment as we are free from desires, karma, samsara of birth, death and rebirth, and material forms. This is also the stage that the wisdoms of the Five Dhyani Buddhas helped us reach, such as Buddha Ratnasambhava's wisdom of equality teaching us to relinquish discrimination to our surroundings, and Buddha Vairochana's *dharmadhatu* wisdom helping us realize the ultimate truth of emptiness. This is how Borobudur acts as a *mandala* of Vajrayana Buddhism, physically aiding the practitioners in our world to reach enlightenment in great speed with its physical guidance in our world.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have discussed many examples of Buddhist art. The starting point of this project was the formation and depiction of Five Buddha Families which is rooted in the figure of the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism. Who, with the development of Vajrayana school of esoteric teachings evolved into the cosmic Buddha Vairochana. Among the earliest examples were Pala Indian sculptures and carvings of Vairochana which showed many similarities between these two important Buddhist deities. As Buddha Vairochana replaces Buddha Shakyamuni as the central deity, the Five Buddha Families and the tantric practice begin to form with Vairochana as the origin. Throughout this analysis, we have learned about how to identify the deities by their own individual iconographical attributes, such as color, hand gestures (*mudra*), cardinal directions, escorts, and other elements such as thrones and such attendant guardians like Garudas. More importantly, we have looked into how these five Buddhas can transfer the five poisons (*kleshas)*, which are the fundamental roots of bard karmas, into Buddha wisdoms to aid the practitioners to achieve enlightenment at a great speed. The Five Buddha families also give blessings to the whole body by each possessing a major organ and sense. Finally, we have discussed the Five Buddha Family *mandalas*, the cosmic diagrams of groups of deities, in the forms of paintings and architecture, and how these *mandalas* convey hidden messages and divine power. The *mandalas* or *thangka* paintings that the nomadic people roll up and carry with them function in the same way, as they are a blessing and aid on the journey to Buddhahood; while the more permanent forms of expression, the

architecture and temple murals, guard our world as well as assist in one's navigation towards enlightenment.

Moreover, this essay asserted the importance of a *guru*, noble teachers of Buddhism. Some of the messages within the arts of the Five Buddha Families are quite self-explanatory, such as the "boon-granting" *mudra,* which is a vivid depiction of the deity passing something to the viewer. However, most iconographies need to be deciphered by a teacher so the untrained eyes and minds can fully comprehend the meaning inherent in the sculptures, paintings, *mandalas*, and architecture. G*urus* are essential to unlocking the power of Vajrayana Buddhism artworks. Additionally, Vajrayana Buddhism has the concept of "four jewels", with the *guru* in front of the traditional "three jewels" of Buddhism: Buddha, *dharma* (Buddha's teaching), and *sangha* (monks and Buddhist community). The importance of *gurus* is even ahead of the Buddha, which makes sense as they are the doorways for the Vajrayana Buddhists to reach the sophisticated and esoteric teachings of Buddhism.

With a sufficient amount of knowledge, art, and the guidance of teachers of Vajrayana Buddhism, one's mind can also journey through the lands of the Five Buddha Families. The worship, or to be more precise, *practice* of viewing the Five Buddha Families can help one achieve higher levels of enlightenment. In conclusion, the arts of the Five Buddha Families are designed to help the participants advance on their paths to Buddhahood.

Appendix: Sanskrit Terms

- *Bodhichitta*: concept in Hinduism and Buddhism. Red and white psychic channels in the body.
- *Dhātu*: realm, world
    - *Dharma-dhātu*: realm of *dharma*, the reality in Buddha's teachings
    - *Karma-dhātu*: realm/world of desire
    - *Rupa-dhātu*: realm/world of forms/matters
    - *Arupa-dhātu*: realm/world of formlessness
    - *Vajra-dhātu*: diamond realm
- *Guru*: teachers, noble religious teachers of Hinduism and Buddhism.
- *Jñāna*: wisdom, Buddha wisdom
    - *Ādarśa-jñāna*: mirror-like wisdom
    - Dharma-dhātu-svabhāva-jñāna: wisdom of *dharmadhatu*, wisdom of reality
    - *Kṛtyānuṣṭhāna-jñāna*: all-accomplishing wisdom
    - *Pratyavekṣanā-jñāna*: wisdom of discernment/observation
    - *Samatā-jñāna*: wisdom of equality
- *Klesha*: poisons, mental states that cause wrong actions, origins of bad karma. Often in groups of five or six: ignorance, anger, greed, pride, jealousy, (doubt).
- *Lakṣaṇa*: auspicious marks of a great man. There are 32 of them: level feet which stood evenly on the ground, the Mark of a thousand-spoked wheel on the soles, projecting

heels, long toes and fingers, pliant hands and feet, soft hand and foot skins, net like lines of palms and soles, raised ankles, calf muscles like an antelope, the palms of the hands could touch the knees without bending, well-retracted male organ, gold colored skin, ten foot aura around him, every hair-root dark colored, ten foot aura around him, soles, palms, shoulders and crown of the head well rounded, area below armpits well-filled, lion shaped body, body erect and upright, full round shoulders, 40 teeth, teeth are even, white and close, four canine teeth are pure white, jaw like a lion, saliva that improves the taste of all food, long and broad tongue, deep and resonant voice, deep blue eyes, eyelashes like a royal bull, *urna*, *ushnisha*, elongated earlobes.

    - *Ushnisha*: one of the 32 auspicious marks of the Buddha. The cranial protrusion.
    - *Urna*: one of the 32 auspicious marks of the Buddha. The dot or white hair between the eyebrows.

- *Mandala*: sacred circle, circular diagram, cosmic diagram of Vajrayana Buddhism
- *Mani*: gemstone, treasure
- *Mudra*: seal, hand or body gestures that convey tantric power.
    - *Abhaya*: do not fear
    - *Bodhyangi*: Fist of wisdom
    - *Bhumisparsa*: earth touching/witnessing, demon tranquilizing
    - *Dharmacakra*: turning the wheel, teaching of the Buddha, Buddha's first sermon
    - *Dhyana*: meditation
    - *Varada*: boon-granting, wish fulfilling
- *Padma*: lotus

- *Pātra*: bowl, jar, begging bowl
- *Ratna*: jewel, treasure
- *Skandhas*: collections, five elements that construct a human being. basic forms, feelings, impulses, cognition, and consciousness
- *Sukhavati*: western paradise of Buddha Amitabha
- *Thangka*: painting on scrolls that can be hanged. Often depicting religious subjects
- *Vajra*: diamond, thunderbolt, symbol of power and unbreakableness, a ritual object in Buddhism and Hinduism
- *Yana*: vehicle, the cart carrying Buddha's teaching, a school of Buddhism
    - *Vajrayana*: diamond vehicle. Sometimes referred as esoteric or tantric Buddhism
    - *Mahayana*: greater vehicle. A very popular school of Buddhism with the goal of enlightenment for all beings
    - *Hinayana*: lesser vehicle. Also known as *Theravada*, the traditional and eldest school from the direct teaching of Buddha Shakyamuni

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