

ART AND RITUAL IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Bruce Robbins

When the *Muse* covered the re-installed South and Southeast Asian galleries in the December 2020 issue (see that article [here](#)), the focus was on G211 and its collection of South Asian deities. Now we turn to G212 to experience the religious art of the Himalayan region. This area of lofty mountains, sometimes known as “The Roof of the World,” includes the Tibetan Plateau, Nepal, Kashmir, Bhutan, plus parts of northern India and Mongolia. Buddhism is the primary religion, adopted from the original Indian Buddhism and merged with indigenous faiths and beliefs to form a distinctive and rich hybrid mix.

Upon entry into the gallery, one is surrounded by deep aubergine walls and splashes of almost psychedelic color – reflecting the pantheon of deities and sometimes vivid rituals associated with Tibetan Buddhism (also known as Vajrayana Buddhism). Led by the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism holds at its core the pursuit of heightened spiritual awareness and wisdom along the path to ultimate enlightenment. Practitioners face “three poisons” of ignorance, greed and hate when progressing on this path. A wide, complex array of rites and rituals aid in getting rid of these negative passions and clearing the way to enlightenment. Some of the rituals are peaceful and meditative; others are more fierce and destructive.

In this gallery bursting with imagery and color, let’s take a look at two objects that are both visual standouts and important tools in Tibetan Buddhist ritual practice. First is the *Carpet of a Flayed Man*. Here we see a man stripped of his skin and spread-eagled, arteries visible, bones arranged carefully around him, and the skull placed between his legs. The imagery, while gruesome, has a potent and exalted purpose: to help with a ritual aimed at encouraging internal detachment from the human body and earthly concerns. To enact the ritual, the carpet is located in the *gonkhang*, a windowless chamber located deep within a monastery for the worship of fierce, protective deities. The practitioner, likely a higher-ranking experienced monk, sits on the carpet and imagines himself being dismembered, part by part, and then rising up in the form of the deity. By doing this, he lets go of corporeality and the things of this world and can transcend obstacles on his way to enlightenment. The carpet, in essence, becomes his “seat of power.”

The carpet also depicts trays holding balls of a dough paste (*gtor ma*) often used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. The paste is made by kneading together barley flour and butter, which is then formed into sacrificial models of human body parts (effigies) to be offered to the fierce protective deities. To complete our visual experience of bodily detachment, the carpet is bordered with a frieze of severed heads.

Next to the carpet in G212, we can view one of these protective deities in a hanging scroll painting, or *tangka*. *Pehar*, with vivid red skin and flashing eyes, is galloping through a roiling landscape rife with fantastical deities and all their symbolism. The *tangka* is also a



Carpet of a Flayed Man, 19th century
Unknown artist, Mongolia
Wool, cotton, and dye
On loan
On View in Gallery 212

meditational tool, often hung in a monastery or a private shrine. It helps the user to visualize himself as the deity pictured and internalize its qualities.

Notice that Pehar brandishes a *vajra* in one hand and a skull cup (*kapala*) in the other. The *vajra*, a short metal club with pronged spherical heads at either end, was originally the weapon of the ancient Hindu god Indra and has become the primary symbol of the Vajrayana school of Buddhism. Because *vajra* is a Sanskrit word meaning both “thunderbolt” and “diamond,” the *vajra* is often used as a ritual weapon symbolizing both the irresistible force of a thunderbolt and the indestructibility of a diamond.



The skull cup, shown as the upper half of a human skull flipped upside down and brimming with brains, is a tool often employed by the protective deities. Notice also a second skull cup at the very bottom of the painting, with more brains and two eyeballs projecting from it – displaying literally and perhaps shockingly, the idea that the brain and other sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose) must be cut away to eliminate delusions and worldly concerns and allow one to have true clarity of mind, wisdom and compassion. It's another expression of bodily detachment as we saw practiced with the carpet.



For more on Tibetan Buddhist ritual using carpets, skull cups and other tools, see this Metropolitan Museum [exhibition](#) from 2010.

There is much more to explore in this gallery, including small statues of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, a ritual staff and crown, and another carpet featuring the flayed skin of a tiger. Whether you are researching a tour or seeking more understanding of Buddhist thought and practice, this gallery will provide a rich and informative experience.



Pehar (Worldly Protector Deity),
Late 17th century
Unknown artist, Tibet
Mineral colors and gold on sized cotton
Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton
2001.77
On View in Gallery 212