



Explore Composition and Structure

Diverse Forms of Mahakala and Other Protectors
Tibet, early 19th century
Ground Mineral Pigment on Cotton
C2007.21.1 (HAR 65787)

This crowded, vibrant painting is dedicated to nine wrathful deities and centers on the six-armed form of Mahakala, the principal protector of the Gelug School of Tibetan Buddhism. For the last several centuries this has been the predominant school in Tibet.

TOUCH THE PAINTING TO EXPLORE



Explore Composition and Structure

Three-fold division

The composition of this painting follows a three-fold division that is typical of Tibetan painting. At the top are the teachers, whose instruction is essential to the practice represented by the painting. In the center are the meditational deities to whom that practice is devoted. At the bottom are various protectors, wealth deities, and other figures within the Buddhist pantheon.

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Panchen Lama

Tsongkhapa

Dalai Lama

MAIN DEITIES

SUBSIDIARY DIETIES

Explore Composition and Structure

TEACHERS

Tibetan Buddhist practice is preserved through the passing of instructions from teacher to student. Thus the teachers within a particular teaching lineage are presented at the top of the painting. Here they are all shown wearing Tibetan monastic dress and the pointed yellow hat particular to the Gelug School. Tsongkhapa, the founder of that school, is at the center and is flanked by the Fourth Panchen Lama and the Ninth Dalai Lama.

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Panchen Lama

Tsongkhapa

Dalai Lama

MAIN DEITIES

SUBSIDIARY DEITIES

Explore Composition and Structure

TEACHERS: Panchen Lama

The Panchen Lama is the second highest incarnation lineage in the Gelug hierarchy. Here the Fourth Panchen Lama, Tenpa Nyima (1782–1853), is depicted. As a scholar he performs a teaching gesture and holds a book. Since he is the teacher of the younger Dalai Lama he is placed more prominently even though the Dalai Lama is the higher incarnation lineage.



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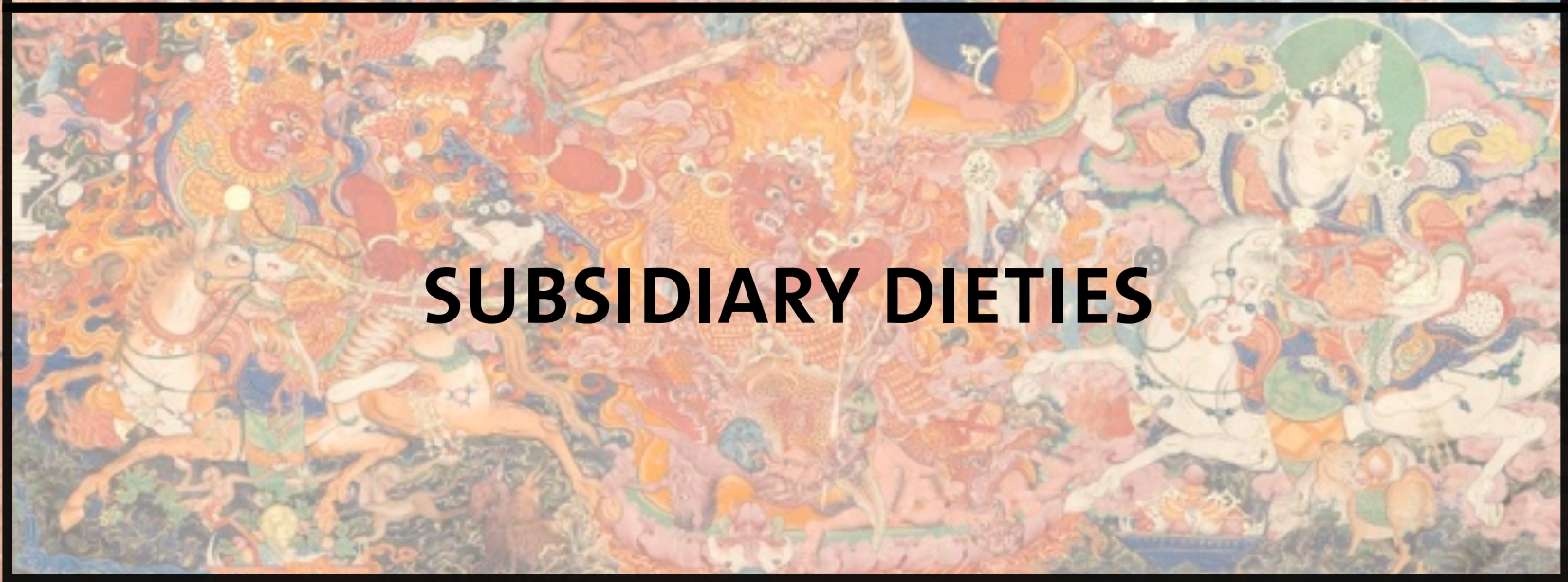
Panchen Lama

Tsongkhapa

Dalai Lama



MAIN DEITIES



SUBSIDIARY DEITIES

Explore Composition and Structure

TEACHERS: Tsongkhapa

Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) was one of the most prolific scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and is the founder of the Gelug School. He is shown teaching and holding two lotuses, which carry a sword and a book. These symbols are representative of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Manjushri, of whom Tsongkhapa is an emanation.



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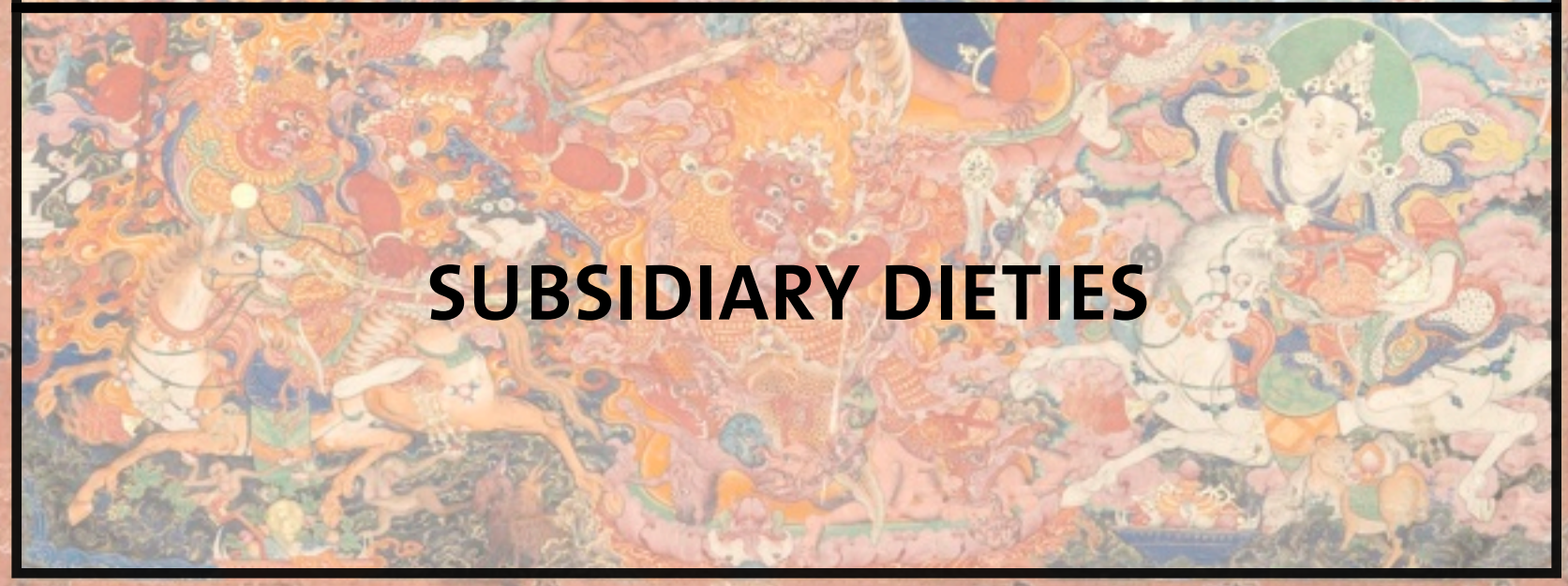
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Explore Composition and Structure

TEACHERS: Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is the highest incarnation lineage in the Gelug hierarchy. Here the young Ninth Dalai Lama, Lungtok Gyatso (1805–1815), is shown. His unusual facial proportions and large eyes indicate his boyhood. He holds a lotus in his right hand and a book in his left.



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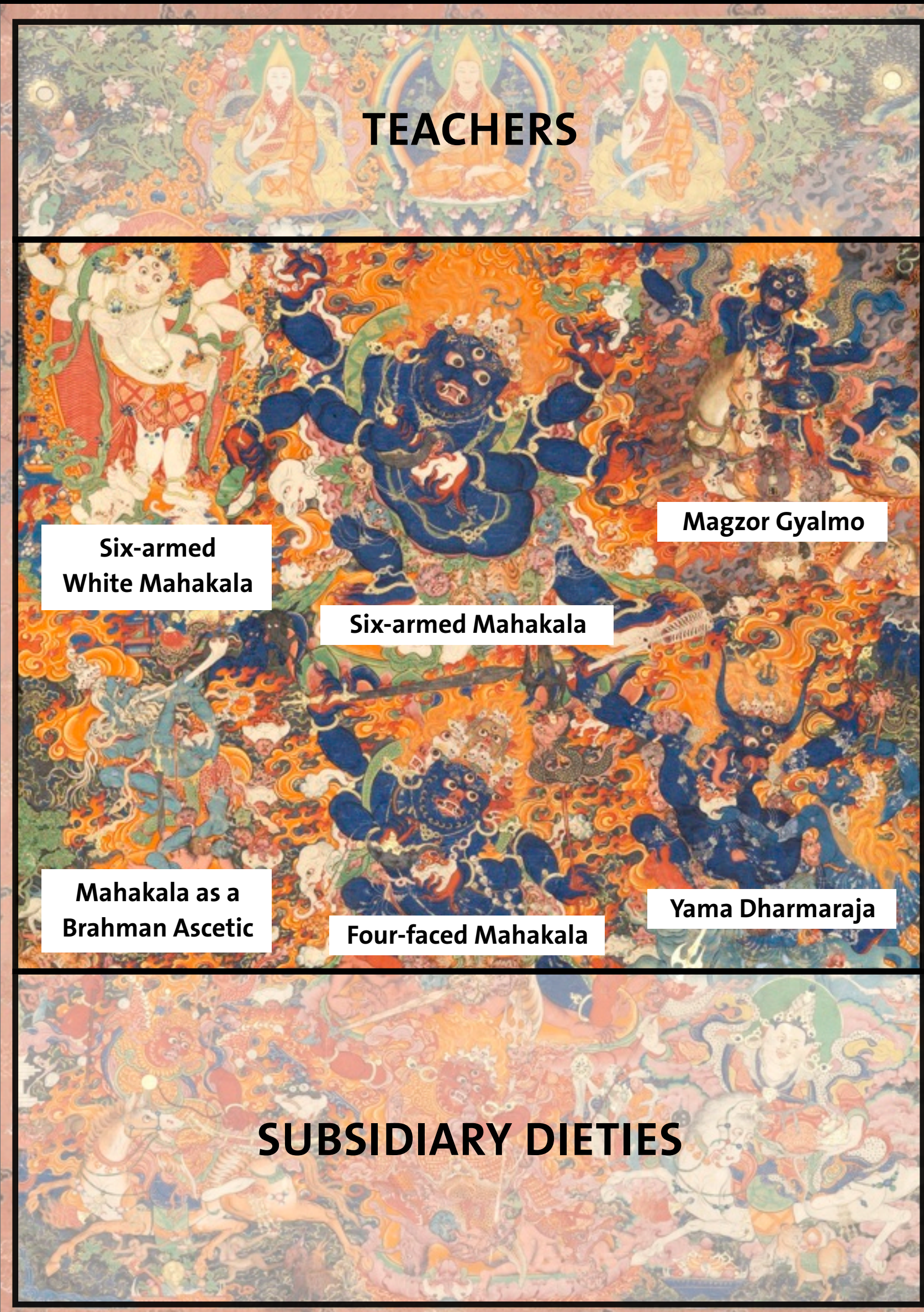
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Explore Composition and Structure

MAIN DEITIES

At the center of the painting six higher-wisdom deities and protectors favored by the Gelug School are depicted. Their relative importance is indicated by their size and position, and each of the six deities serves a different function. The four leftmost deities are all different forms of Mahakala.

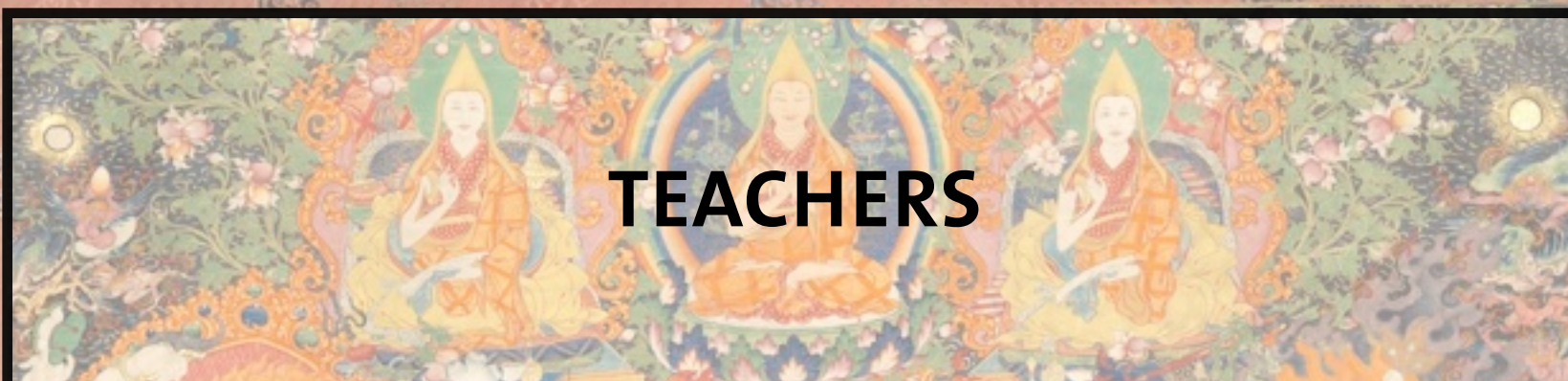
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TEACHERS



Six-armed
White Mahakala

Six-armed Mahakala

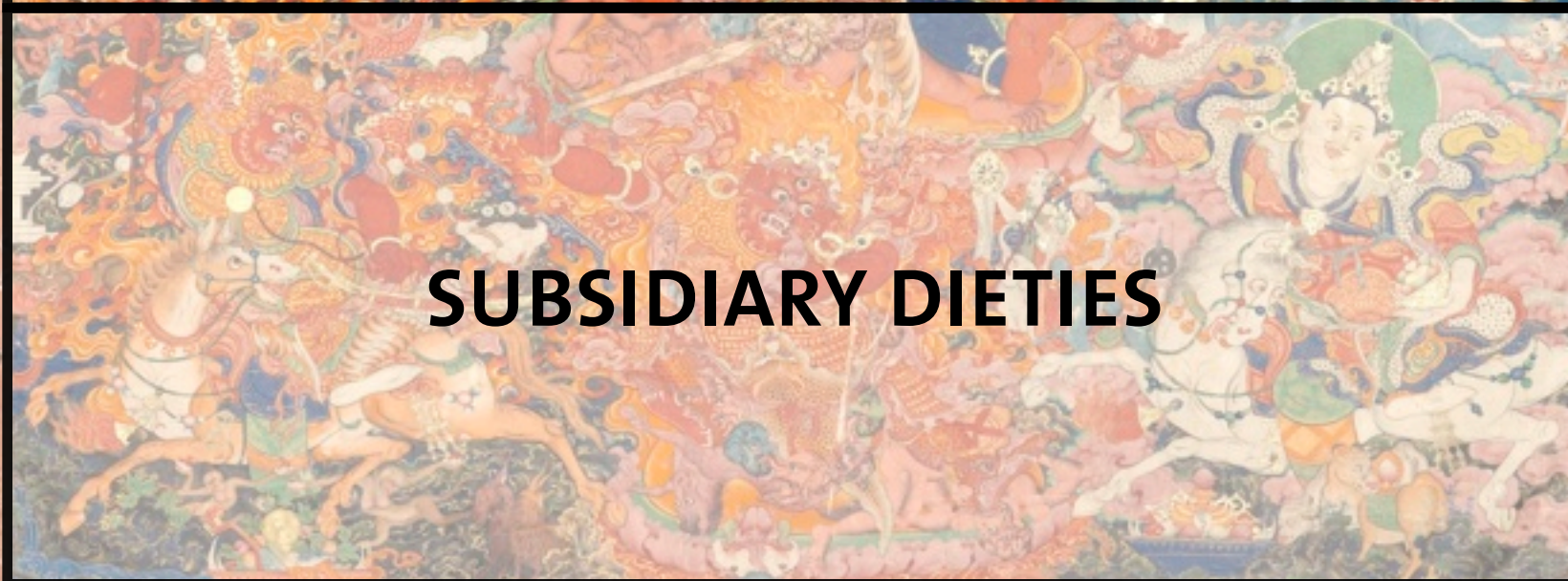
Magzor Gyalmo

Mahakala as a
Brahman Ascetic

Four-faced Mahakala

Yama Dharmaraja

SUBSIDIARY DEITIES



Explore Composition and Structure

MAIN DEITIES:

Six-armed White Mahakala

Six-armed White Mahakala is the wish granting mighty king of gems. He is white and holds a large gem in his main right hand and his skull-cup is filled with nectar and a vase of jewels. His wrath is less pronounced, and he stands on two Ganapatis against a halo of jewels.



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TEACHERS



Six-armed
White Mahakala

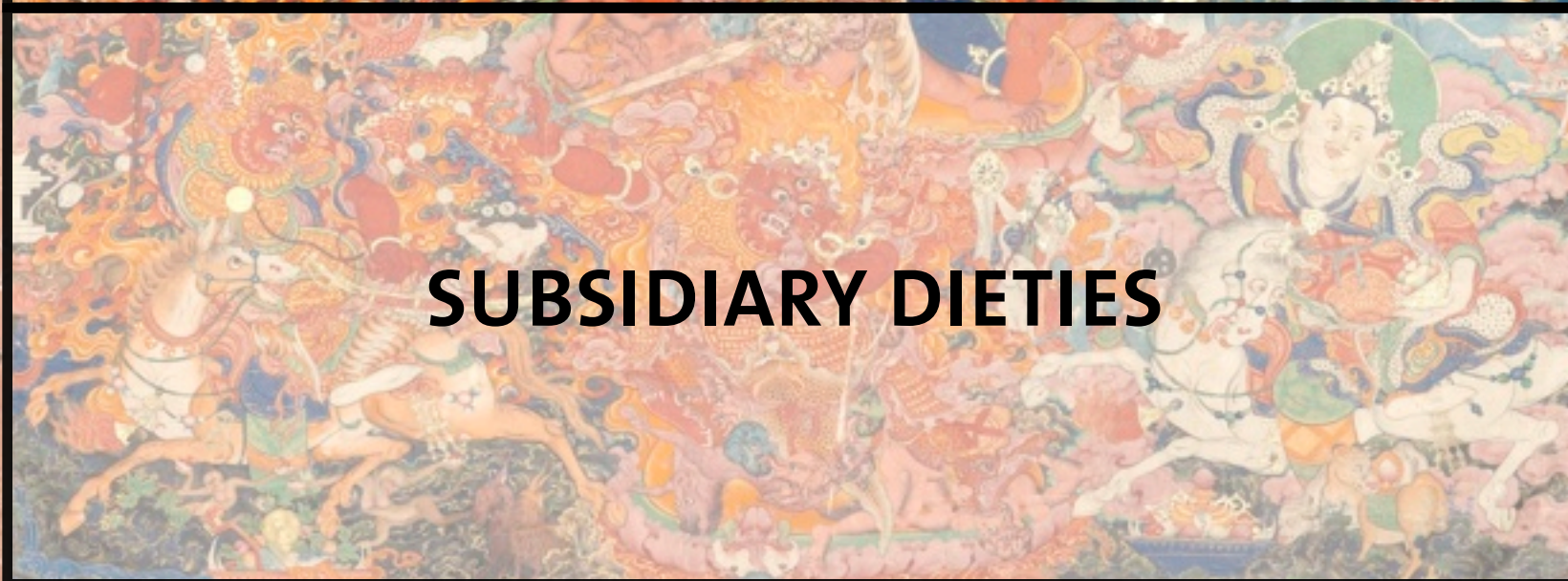
Six-armed Mahakala

Magzor Gyalmo

Mahakala as a
Brahman Ascetic

Four-faced Mahakala

Yama Dharmaraja



SUBSIDIARY DEITIES

Explore Composition and Structure

MAIN DEITIES: Six-armed Mahakala

At the center of the painting is Six-armed Mahakala, lord of pristine awareness and remover of all obstacles, the principal protector deity of the Gelug School. He is dark blue, six-armed, and holds a rosary of skulls in his upper right hand. He tramples on the elephant-headed Ganapati, here symbolizing the obstacles to be overcome.



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Six-armed
White Mahakala

Six-armed Mahakala

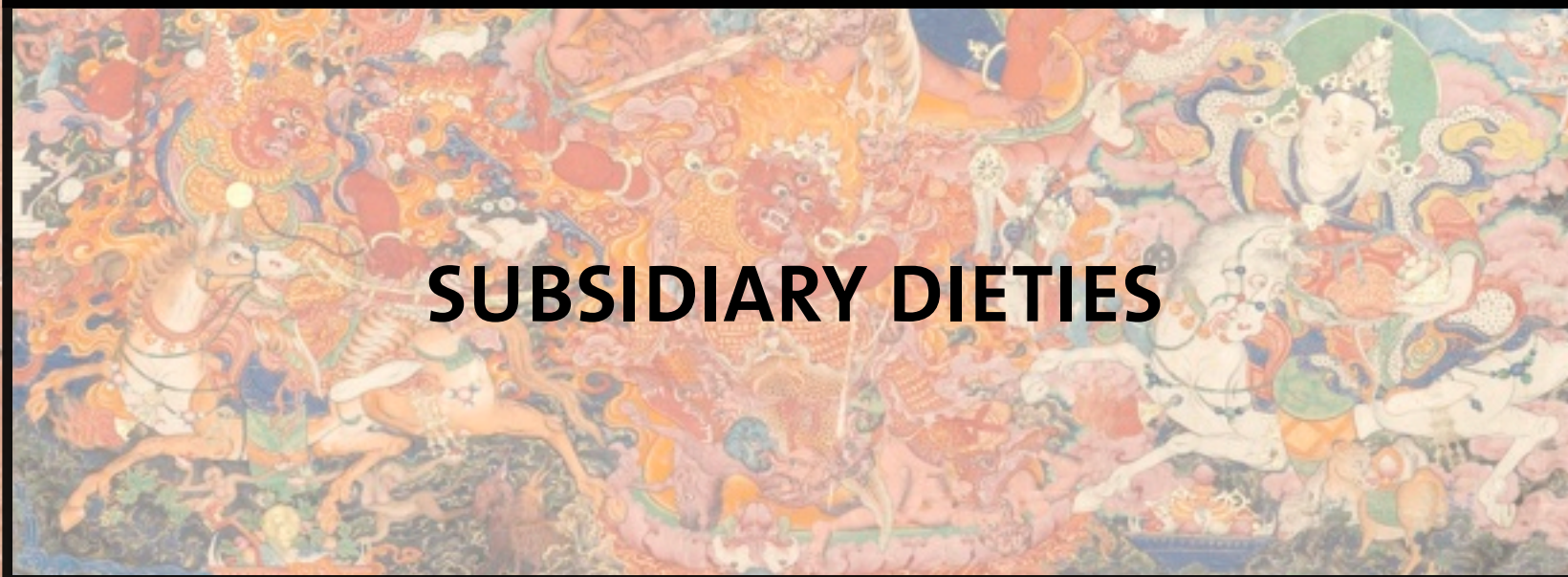
Magzor Gyalmo

Mahakala as a
Brahman Ascetic

Four-faced Mahakala

Yama Dharmaraja

SUBSIDIARY DEITIES



Explore Composition and Structure

MAIN DEITIES: Magzor Gyalmo

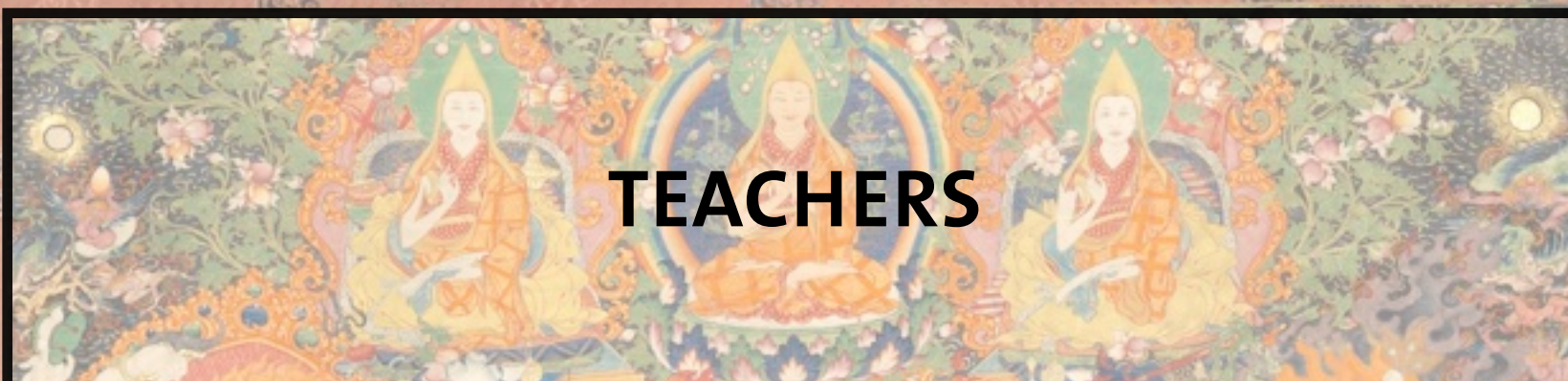
At the top right of the central area is the wrathful goddess Magzor Gyalmo, the “Queen Who Repels the Army.” She is the two-armed form of Palden Lhamo, the principal protectress of Tibet. She rides a mule, holds a trident and a skull cup filled with a heart, and a lion and a snake emerge from her ears.



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Six-armed
White Mahakala

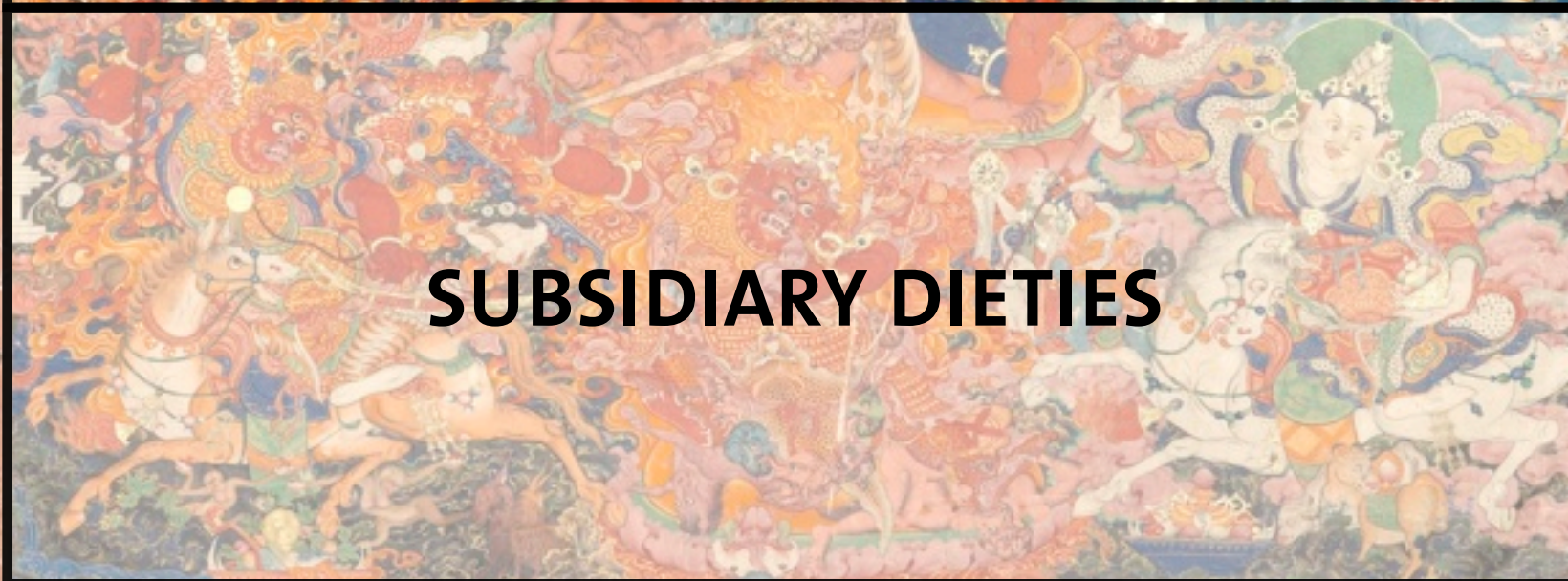
Six-armed Mahakala

Magzor Gyalmo

Mahakala as a
Brahman Ascetic

Four-faced Mahakala

Yama Dharmaraja



SUBSIDIARY DEITIES

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MAIN DEITIES:

Mahakala as a Brahman Ascetic

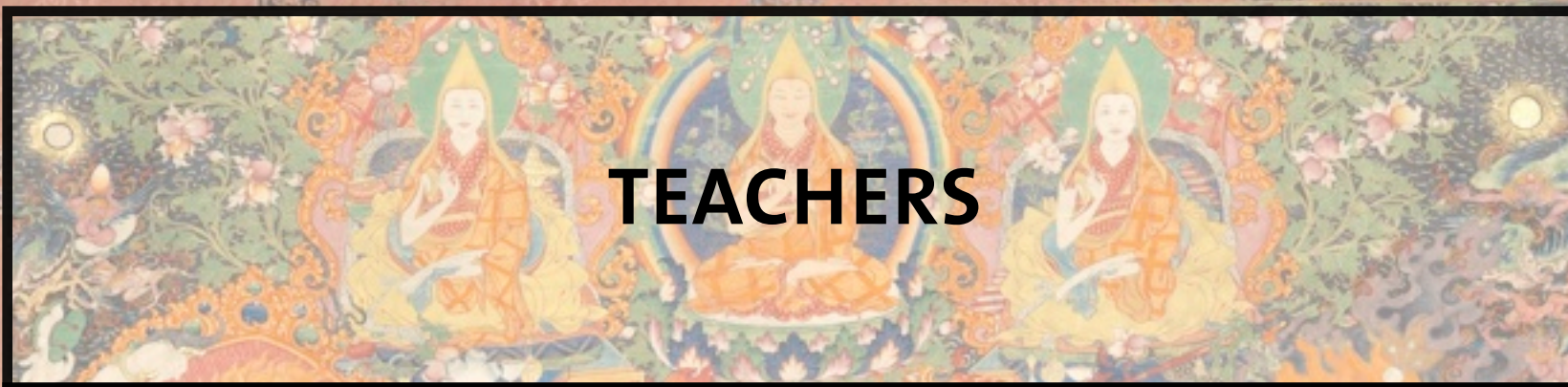
In the bottom left is Mahakala in the form of a Brahman ascetic. He is bright blue and dances with a bone flute and a skull cup. Other attributes, such as the sword and the trident, identify him as a disguised form of Mahakala and the bone jewelry indicates his wrathful nature.



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Six-armed
White Mahakala

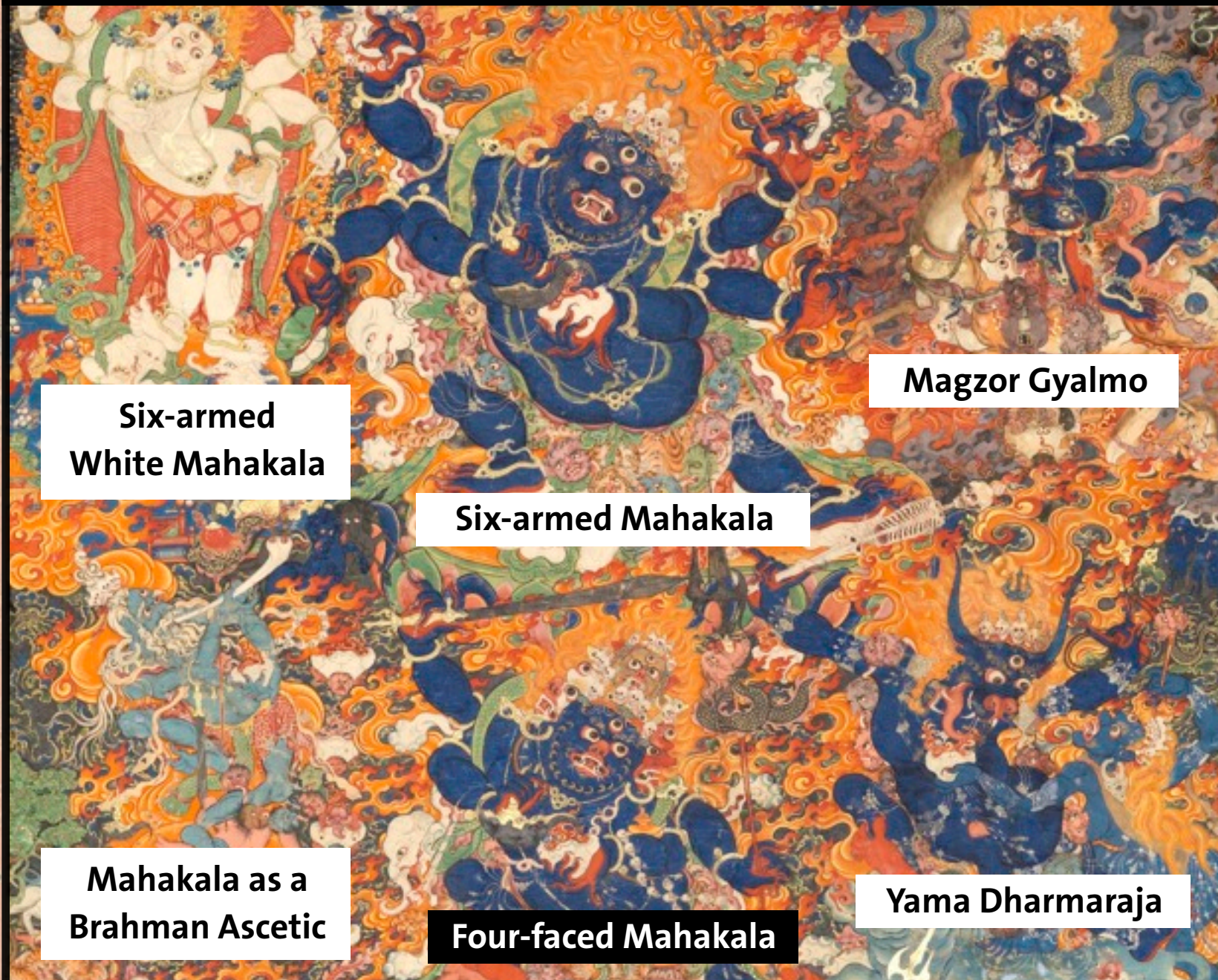
Six-armed Mahakala

Magzor Gyalmo

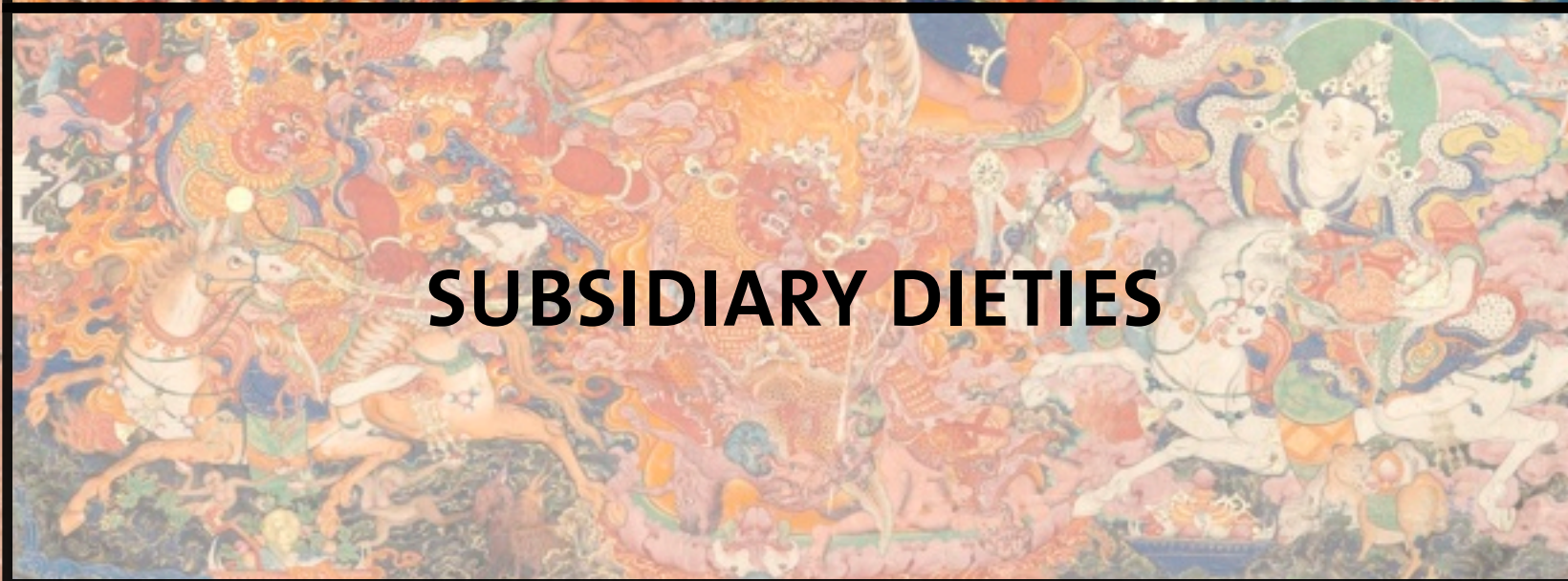
Mahakala as a
Brahman Ascetic

Four-faced Mahakala

Yama Dharmaraja



SUBSIDIARY DEITIES



Explore Composition and Structure

MAIN DEITIES: Four-faced Mahakala

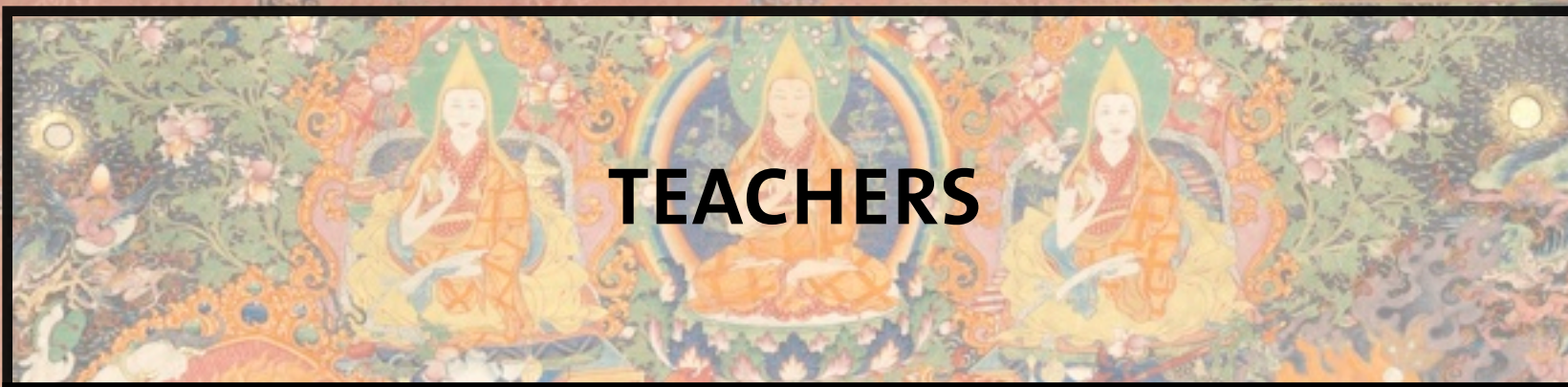
In the lower center is Four-faced Mahakala. He has four differently colored faces and four arms, the main ones with a curved knife and skull cup. The other arms hold a sword and a trident.



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Six-armed
White Mahakala

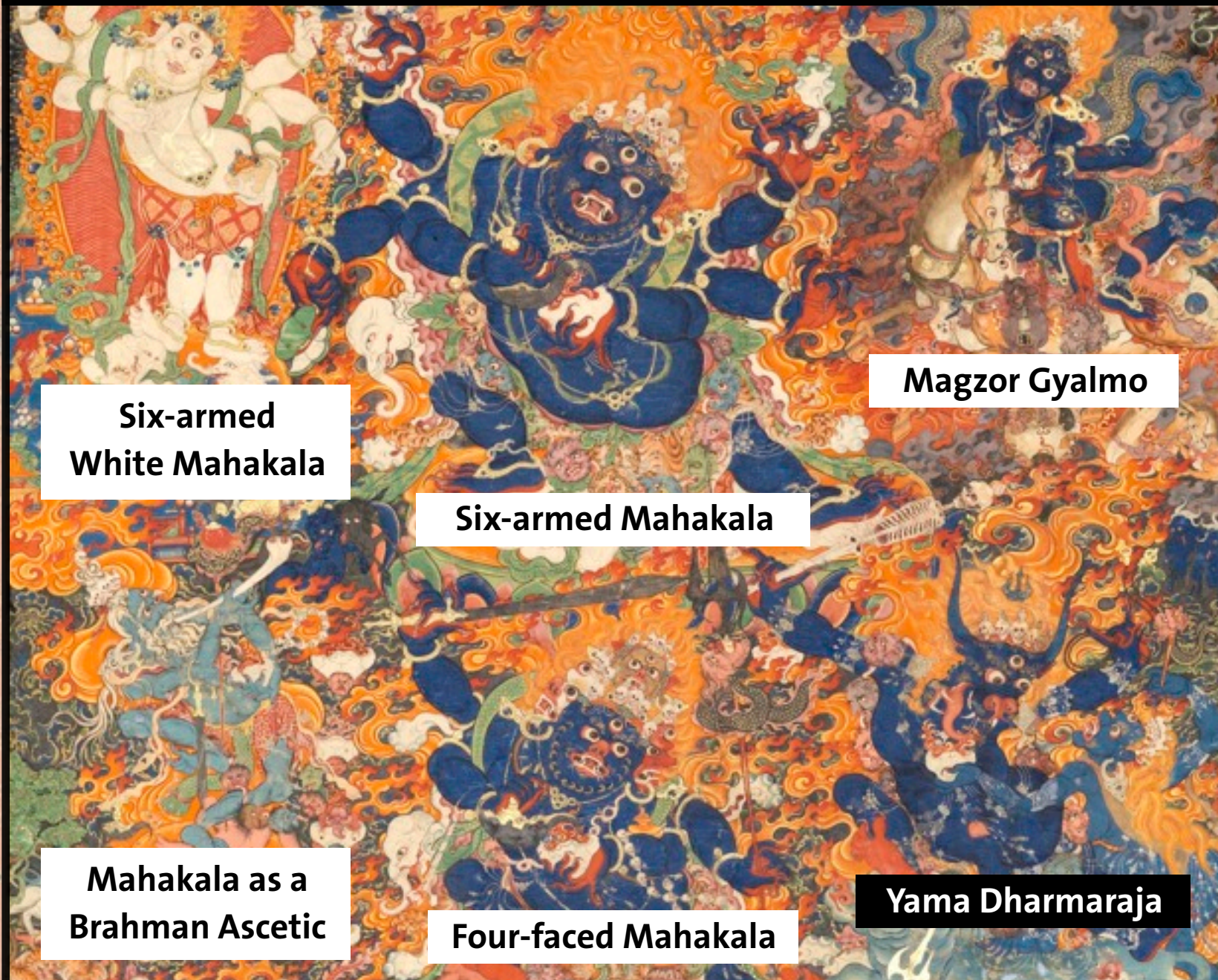
Six-armed Mahakala

Magzor Gyalmo

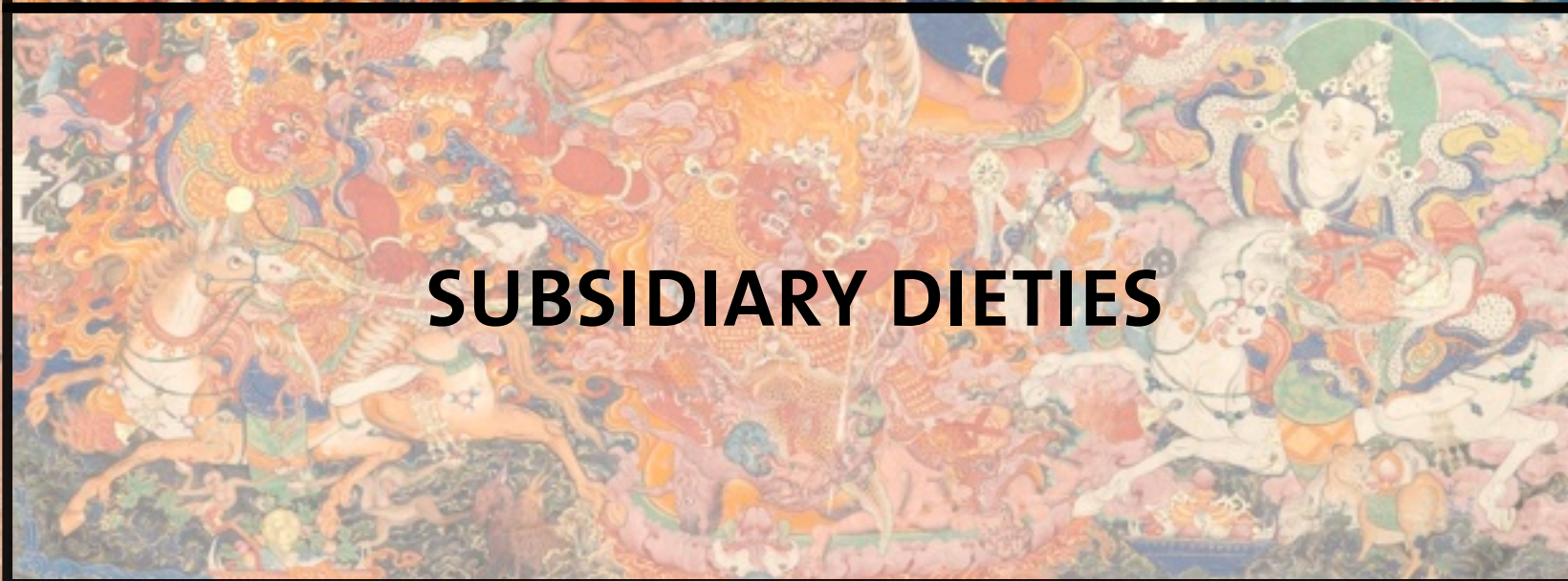
Mahakala as a
Brahman Ascetic

Four-faced Mahakala

Yama Dharmaraja



SUBSIDIARY DEITIES



Explore Composition and Structure

MAIN DEITIES: Yama Dharmaraja

At the bottom right is the buffalo-headed Yama Dharmaraja, “King of the Dharma,” or Buddhist teaching, together with his sister. Yama, is the Indian god of death, who rides a bull and has a bull’s head. Yama Dharmaraja looks like Yama but symbolizes the surpassing of death. He holds a bone stick, skeleton, and noose.



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Explore Composition and Structure

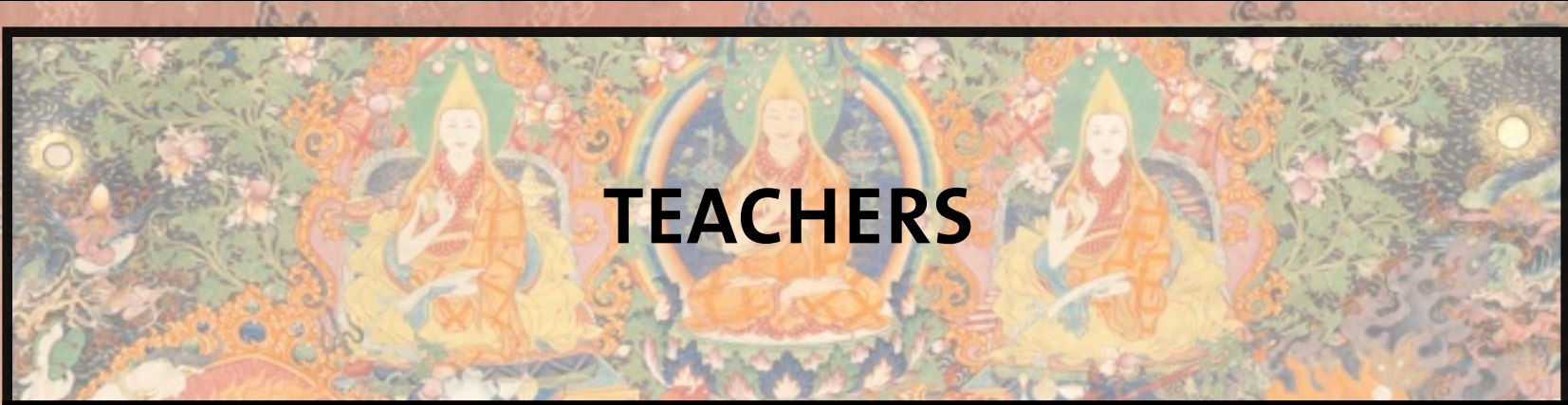
SUBSIDIARY DEITIES

The bottom area of the painting is occupied by deities whose practice complements and facilitates that of the main deities. These deities are invoked for more mundane goals such as protection, health, and wealth. The center and the left of this register are filled with worldly protectors, converted local spirits bound to protect Buddhism, and the right side presents a wealth deity.

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TEACHERS



MAIN DEITIES



Sebdrabcen

Begtse

Tshangpa Karpo

Explore Composition and Structure

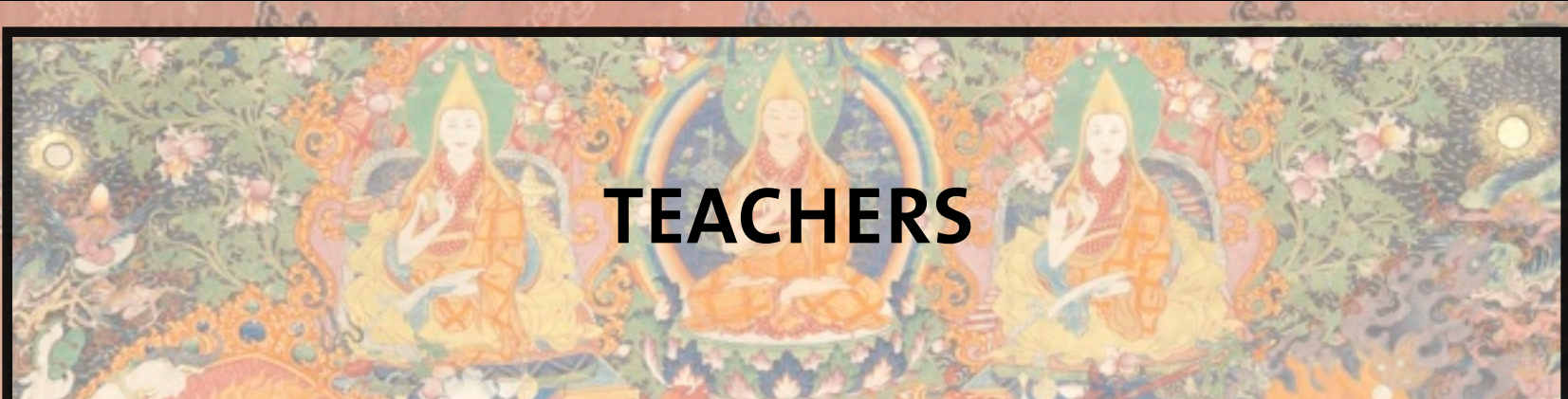
SUBSIDIARY DEITIES: Sebdrabcen

In the bottom-left corner is the earth-spirit Sebdrabcen, a local protector of Ganden Monastery, one of the three large monasteries of the Gelug school around Lhasa, Tibet. He brandishes a club to disperse evil spirits, a noose, and a lance under his arm. His headdress is decorated with flags, banners, and a small conch.



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TEACHERS



MAIN DEITIES



Sebdrabcen

Begtse

Tshangpa Karpo

Explore Composition and Structure

SUBSIDIARY DEITIES: Begtse

At the bottom center is the enlightened protector Begtse, the “Great Coat of Mail.” He is red, is dressed like a Tibetan warrior, and holds a sword and a fresh heart. Further weapons are held in the bend of his arm. He stands on a horse and a corpse. Begtse is an important protector of the Gelug School.



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MAIN DEITIES



Sebdrabcen

Begtse

Tshangpa Karpo

Explore Composition and Structure

SUBSIDIARY DEITIES: Tshangpa Karpo

In the bottom-right corner is Tshangpa Karpo, the peaceful aspect of Sedrabcen, the deity in the bottom-left corner. He is a white-skinned king with a conch-shaped turban headdress. He holds a lance and a bowl filled with jewels and a vase. Such worldly deities are often associated with particular places and monasteries and thus help to determine a painting's origin.



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