

GATEWAY TO HIMALAYAN ART

LOOKING GUIDE

Use this guide to help you recognize common symbols and important figures as you explore the museum's galleries.

The selection of figures and symbols featured in this guide is only the beginning. After your museum visit, log on to rmanyc.org for more information about the art of the Himalayas.



**RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART**

150 West 17th Street, NYC 10011
212.620.5000 rmanyc.org

FIGURES



◀ BUDDHAS

Buddhas, or “enlightened persons,” can be identified by a cranial protuberance, elongated earlobes and a tuft of hair between their eyebrows. Siddhartha Gautama, often referred to as the Buddha or Buddha Shakyamuni, is the historical Buddha.

BODHISATTVAS ▲

Bodhisattvas are awakened beings who aspire to attain enlightenment and help others achieve it. They can be male or female and are portrayed adorned with crowns and jewelry.



◀ TANTRIC DEITIES

Numerous forms of deities are described in religious texts called tantras. These deities personify various enlightened qualities and can have many heads, arms, and legs, all of which symbolize their many abilities.



▲ WRATHFUL DEITIES

Recognized by flaming hair, bulging eyes, fangs and, garlands of severed heads, these deities serve as protectors of Buddhist teachings.



▲ FEMALE DEITIES

Bodhisattvas and tantric deities can be depicted in female form. Just like their male counterparts they embody enlightened qualities and can be both peaceful and wrathful in appearance.

HUMANS

Himalayan art not only depicts deities but also portraits of accomplished religious teachers (lamas), the Buddha's original disciples (arhats), and spiritually accomplished tantric masters (mahasiddhas).

POSTURES

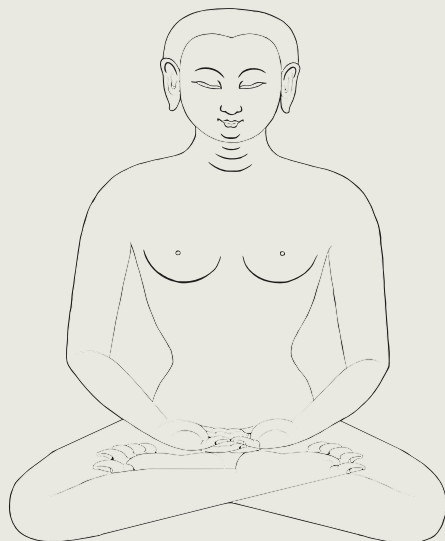


▲ STANDING

This posture features a triple-bend of the body at the knee, hip, and waist.

LOTUS ▶

Also known as vajra position, this posture is associated with meditation.



▲ ROYAL EASE

This relaxed posture is commonly associated with regal leisure.



▲ DANCING



▲ ARCHER/HUNTER'S STANCE

GESTURES



◀ TOUCHING THE EARTH

This is the gesture of the Buddha calling the earth to witness his enlightenment.



◀ GRANTING WISHES AND BLESSINGS

The right hand is extended in a giving gesture.



◀ TEACHING

The hands form the shape of a wheel, symbolizing the "turning of the wheel of dharma," a reference to teaching the Buddha's doctrine.



▲ DO NOT FEAR (PROTECTION)

TANTRIC UNITY ▼

This gesture is that of embracing a consort, and is symbolic of bringing together two aspects of enlightenment, wisdom and method.



◀ PRAYER (REVERENCE)



▼ CONTEMPLATION

IMPLEMENTS

VAJRA ▶

A vajra is a ritual scepter, an implement used in tantric practices, and an attribute of tantric masters and deities. It generally symbolizes method, the male aspect of enlightenment.



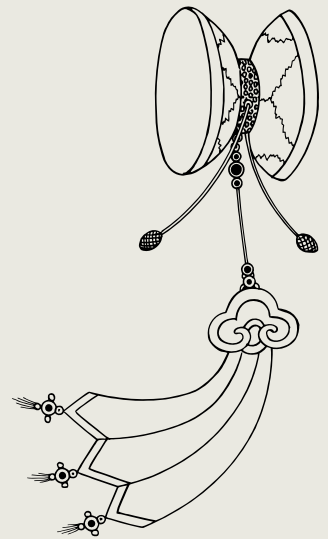
BELL ▶

A bell is often paired with the vajra and is another implement used in tantric practices and an attribute of tantric masters and deities. It generally symbolizes wisdom, the feminine aspect of enlightenment, and its ringing is the sound of emptiness.



HAND DRUM ◀

An implement used in tantric practices, the two halves symbolize the union of two aspects of enlightenment. When paired with a bell, it represents the male aspect of enlightenment and its drumming is the sound of the bliss of realizing the true nature of reality. Large hand drums are used in the Tibetan practice of “cutting the ego.” Their sound represents impermanence.



THIGHBONE TRUMPET ▲

This instrument is used in tantric rituals performed in charnel, or funerary, grounds and is played as an offering to wrathful deities. Its sound is said to be pleasing to wrathful deities but terrifying to evil spirits.



THREE-BLADED DAGGER ▼

This implement is used in tantric rituals and is also an attribute of wrathful deities. It symbolizes cutting through ignorance, desire, and hatred, the three “root poisons” that perpetuate the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

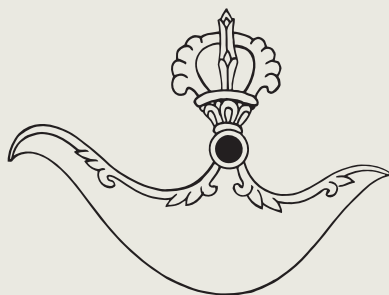
SKULL CUP ▶

A skull cup is an attribute of tantric deities and is usually paired with a curved knife. It can symbolize a mind filled with the bliss of realizing the true nature of reality.



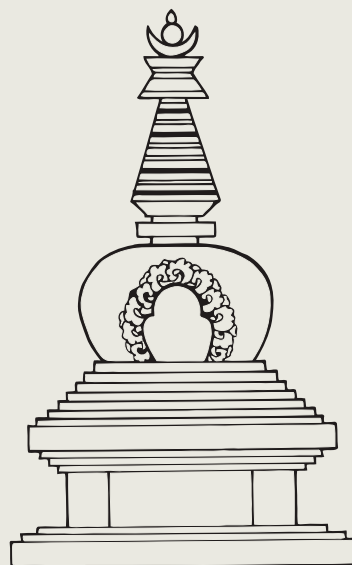
CURVED KNIFE ▶

This weapon is an attribute of tantric deities and is usually paired with a skull cup. When held by female deities, it symbolizes wisdom's destruction of all obstacles to enlightenment. When held by male deities, it represents the method aspect of enlightenment.



SEVEN OFFERINGS ◀

These seven offerings are symbolic representations of the seven welcoming gifts given to guests in ancient India. They are presented to deities and can include water, flowers, incense, light, perfume, food, and music.



◀ TANTRIC STAFF

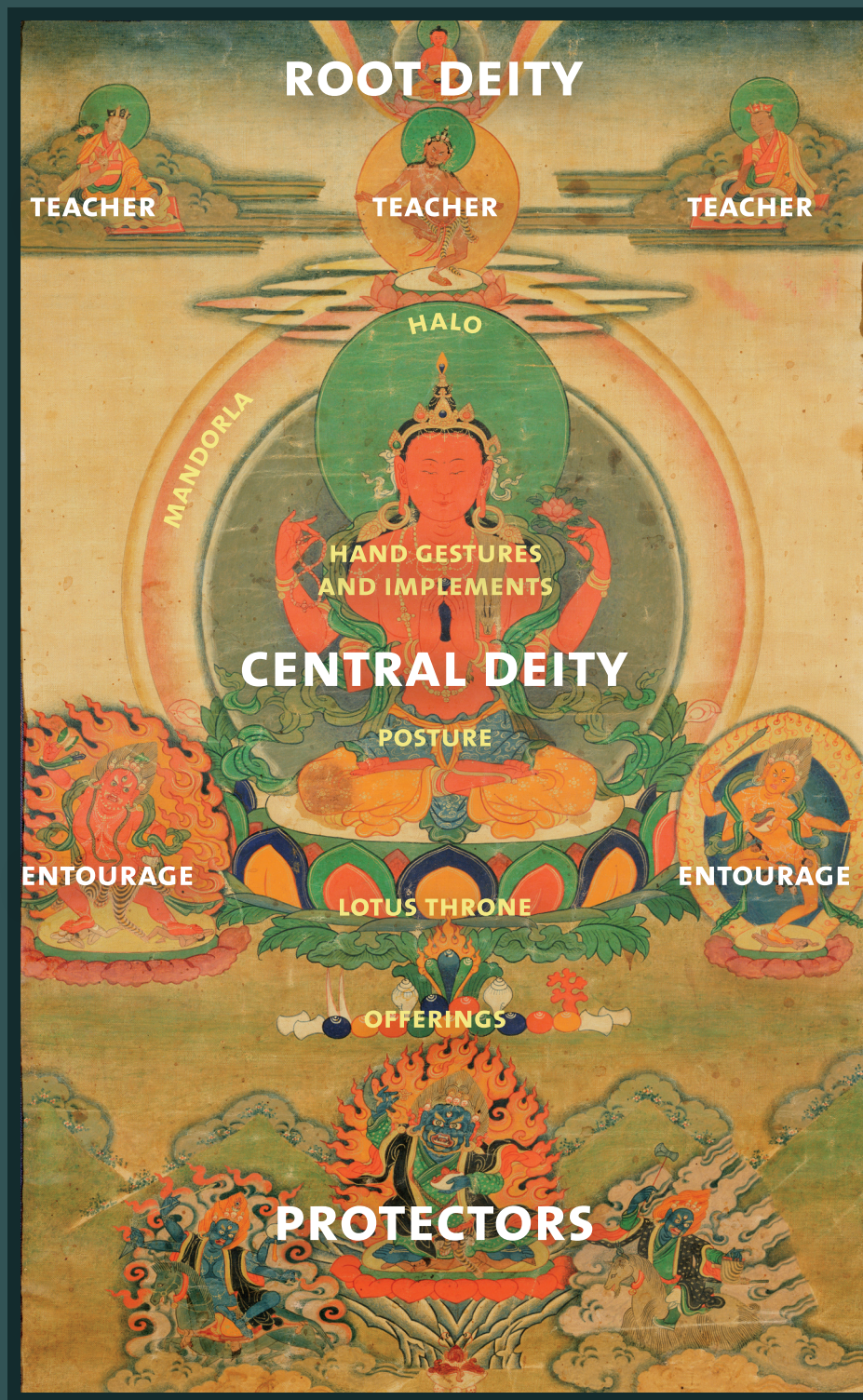
An attribute of tantric deities, this staff represents the union of two aspects of enlightenment. When held by a male deity, it symbolizes his female consort as wisdom, and when held by a female deity, it represents her male consort as method.



◀ STUPA

Stupas were originally burial mounds housing relics of the Buddha. They symbolize the "mind of the buddha," attained at complete enlightenment.

COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE OF A PAINTING



Avalokiteshvara
Eastern Tibet; 19th century
Pigments on cloth
12 x 19 1/2 in.
C2006.66.359 (HAR 790)