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The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art

John C. Huntington, Dina Bangdel

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Attention to Himalayan Buddhist art has come to the forefront of art historical scholarship in recent years, especially in the areas of connoisseurship and attribution. Several major exhibitions have highlighted the artistic achievements of the Himalayan cultures, yet very few have focused primarily on the reasons for the creation of the art and its original intent. The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art attempts to fill this lacuna in the scholarship by showing that the function of Himalayan Buddhist art is to interpret and give physical form to specific Buddhist practices.

The exhibition catalogue for The Circle of Bliss points the way to an entirely new direction for the study of the visual representations of the Chakrasamvara Tantra and other key Buddhist Tantras. The texts of the Chakrasamvara Tantra offer profound meditational techniques to practitioners to enable them to experience the increased awareness necessary for reaching the ultimate state of human perfection, or Enlightenment. Here, for the first time in Himalayan art historical scholarship, the works of art are presented in their socio-religious context, with details about how their symbolic visual language expresses the attainment of that path. The study focuses on the esoteric meditations related to Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi, which are regarded as among the principal meditational practices throughout the Himalayan Buddhist world. Long believed to be taught only to initiated disciples, the details of these meditations have gradually come into the light of modern scholarship over the last sixty years. With this increased public awareness, the authors have been allowed a unique opportunity to explain these esoteric processes without breaking any of the still-secret traditions. The book’s thematic emphasis provides a clear, well-articulated overview of the Himalayan Buddhist meditational process from its inception through its completion stages.

The study delineates the geo-cultural development across Asia of the diverse esoteric religious practices of Himalayan Buddhism, especially the seminal contribution of the Newar Buddhist community of Nepal in the transmission and reinterpretation of the esoteric Tantric Buddhist teachings. The practices of the Newar community, in particular the Chakrasamvara teachings, are revealed as a major force in the development of Buddhism.

Featuring approximately 160 of the aesthetically finest and most powerful masterpieces of Indian, Nepalese, Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian art produced over the past thirteen centuries, the catalogue includes many works published for the first time. It highlights the extraordinary artistic accomplishments of esoteric Buddhism and at the same time leads the reader to understand the intrinsic function of these exquisite works. In this in-depth contextualization of the art works, the complex world of Himalayan Buddhist art has been explicated beyond aesthetic appreciation to a germane understanding of its innermost meaning and its service in the pursuit of Enlightenment.

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