

THE EIGHT FORMS OF GURU PADMASAMBHAVA

—By Lama Anagarika Govinda

Guru Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet by King Tisong Detsen (*Khri-srong-lde-btsan*) in the year 747 A.D., established the first Buddhist monastery at Samye (*bSam-yas*) in 787, and founded the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism known as Nying-ma (*rNying-ma*). He was one of the greatest scholars and masters of yoga of his time. He acquitted the knowledge and practice of all the major sadhanas and yogic methods of tantric and pre-tantric times, and he received initiation into eight fundamental doctrines. The eight forms in which Padmasambhava is depicted, are therefore not different incarnations, as popularly believed, but the representations of his eight main initiations, in each of which he assumed a new personality, symbolized by a new name (as gained in higher forms of initiation) and a form of appearance, corresponding to that name. Because initiation is equivalent to entering a new life, it is a form of rebirth.

In his most important and characteristic form Padmasambhava appears in the royal robes of the King of Sahor, but holding the insignia of spiritual realization:

1. the *khatvanga*, a staff, surmounted by a double-vajra (*visva-vajra*), the symbol of universality and the "Wisdom that accomplishes all works",—a vessel, containing the elixir of immortality (*amrita-kalasa*), two human heads and a skull, symbolizing greed, hatred and ignorance, which have been overcome by the knowledge of the Three Worlds, and the Three Times, symbolized by a flaming trident (*trisul*). The staff itself represents the *sushumna* or the central current of psychic energy, which combines the solar and lunar forces (*pingala* & *ida*, respectively) in one mighty uprush of conscious realization. Thus, all these symbols constitute various aspects of insight into the nature of reality.

2. The skull-bowl (*kapala*), in which the vessel with the Water of Immortality (*mrita-kalasa*) is placed, rests in the left hand of the Guru, because the knowledge or conscious experience of death (as gained in the higher forms of initiation) leads to the realization of immortality, to the experience of the Greater Life. The *amrita-kalasa*, moreover, is the attribute of *Amitayus*, the Buddha of Infinite Life, the *Sambhogakaya* reflex of the *Dhyani-Buddha Amitabha*.

3. The Vajra in the Guru's right hand (raised in *abhaya-mudra*, the gesture of fearlessness and blessing), is the scepter of spiritual power,

the means through which wisdom is put into action. It may also be displayed in a threatening attitude, the hand above the right knee, in the act of subduing evil forces. In a devotional Tibetan text Padmasambhava is described in the following words:

“Being the end of confusion and the beginning of realization,
He wears the royal robes of the Three Vehicles (of liberation),
He holds the Vajra of Skilful Means in his right hand
And in his left the Skull-bowl of Wisdom with the Elixir of Life.
He cuts off the heads of hatred, greed and ignorance
And carries them like ornaments on his trident.”

His hat (known as the “lotus cap”) is adorned with the symbols of the crescent moon, the sun-disk and a small flame-like protuberance which signifies the union of lunar and solar forces (Tib. *thig-le*), the realization of the *Dharmachatu* ‘Wisdom’. The hat is surmounted by a Vajra and an eagle’s feather. The latter indicates the Guru’s soaring mind, penetrating the highest realm of reality.

Flanking the main figure of Padmasambhava are two female devotees, often described as his two consorts, a misconception that is being repeated in popular as well as in scholarly publications. Evans-Wentz identifies the two figures as Bhasadhara, the Queen of Sahor, and the Princess Mandarava. But since Padmasambhava left the royal palace and gave up his kingdom, like Buddha Sakyamuni before him, Bhasadhara, to whom he had been married, did not play any further role in his life. However, the two female devotees and disciples, who were of paramount importance, were the Indian Princess Mandarava and the Tibetan Khadoma Yeshe Ts’ho-rgyal. Both of them are looked upon as re-incarnations of divine origin. The latter, who was regarded as an incarnation of Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, was gifted with such a perfect memory, that she was able to remember every word of the Guru. In this way she became Padmasambhava’s sole biographer. Iconographically she is shown in the garb of a heavenly being of white complexion, adorned with the traditional ornaments and flying scarves, while Mandarava is generally clad in the costume of an Indian hill-princess. Her face is of yellowish complexion. They both are offering *amrita* either from a skull-bowl or a vase-like vessel.

Over the head of Padmasambhava often appears the red Dhyani-Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. He is the spiritual source of Padmasambhava, who thus may be called an embodied ray of Amitabha on the earthly plane.

Therefore, in the dedicatory verses at the beginning of the Bardo Thodol (*bar-dohi thos-grol*)—the Book of the Spontaneous Libe-

ration from the Intermediate State (between life and rebirth), known as "The Tibetan Book of the Dead", ascribed to Padmasambhava, it is said:

"To Amitabha, [the Buddha of] Infinite Light, as *Dharmakaya* (the Body of the Universal Law),
To the peaceful and wrathful forms [of the Dhyani-Buddhas] of the Lotus Order, as *Sambhogakaya* (the Body of Spiritual Enjoyment),
To Padmasambhava, the Protector of Sentient Beings, as human incarnation (*Nirmanakaya*: Body of Transformation):

Obeisance to them the Gurus of the Three Bodies."

Sun and moon, seen in the upper space of every Thangka, represent the spiritual forces of *Pingala* and *ida*, which move the universe and flow as two currents of energy through the human body.

Grouped around the main image of Padmasambhava, who forms the centre of the ninefold *mandala*, are his eight forms of appearance:

1. *Padma-hbyung-gnas* (the Tibetan version of "the Lotus-born") in his vajrasattva form, dark-blue, embraced by his *Prajna*, the embodiment of his Wisdom (generally light-blue) sometimes white), because — according to his symbolical biography — Padmasambhava took on the aspect of *Vajradhara*, when he was initiated into the doctrine of the Great Perfection (*rDzogs-chen*), in which the indestructable and transparent diamond-nature of our innermost being is realized.

2. Guru *Sakya-Seng-ge*, "The Lion of the Sakya Clan". In this form Padmasambhava is identified with Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, thus indicating Padmasambhava's initiation into the teachings of the earliest schools of Buddhism, as represented by the Small Vehicle (*Hinayana*).

3. Guru *Padmasambhava* as a *bhikshu* or *pandita* of the Great Vehicle, indicating his initiation into the teachings of the *Mahayana* School and his entering upon the Bodhisattva Path.

4. Guru *Lo-dan Chog-se* (*bLo-IDan mChog-sred*); "the Guru Possessing Wisdom and the Highest Aspirations". He appears here in kingly robes, his right hand raised with a *damaru*, from which the eternal sound (*shabda*) of the Dharma rhythmically emerges and pervades the universe. The left hand holds a skull-bowl with *amrita*.

5. Guru *Padma Gyalpo*, "the Lotus King", is very similar to the previous figure and distinguishes himself mainly by holding the Mirror of Truth in his left hand. Sometimes he is also depicted with the mirror held up in his right hand, in which case the left hand holds the skull-

bowl. In some thangkas the emblems of these two kings are reversed, so that it seems that these two figures are more or less interchangeable.

6. Guru Dorji-Do-Lo (*rDo-rJe Gro-lod*), "the Diamond Comforter" (?) is a wrathful appearance (*krodha-bhairava*), red in colour, surrounded by flames (symbolizing knowledge in its 'terrible' illusion-devouring aspect), riding on a tiger, holding a vajra in his outstretched right hand, and in his left hand a *phur-bu*, a magical dagger, which destroys evil influences, exorcises demons and drives away the powers of darkness. The prostrate human form underneath the tiger represents a conquered demon.

7. Guru Nyima Ozer (*Nyi-ma-hOd-gzer*), "the Sun-ray Guru", appears as an ascetic of the Heruka (unclad) type. His left (some times his right) hand holds the sun by a ray, his right (sometimes his left) hand holds a three-pointed staff (*khatvanga*). He wears a crown of skulls and a tiger-skin around his loins. His colour is yellow.

8. Guru Seng-ge Da-dog (*Seng-ge sgra-sgrogs*), "the Guru with the Roaring Voice of a Lion", a dark blue demonical figure, clad in a lionskin, dangling from his shoulders, and a tiger-skin as a lion-colth he is surrounded by flames, in his right hand he wields a vajra in a menacing way, and the lefthand is either empty or holds a bell (*ghanta*) before his chest. He stands on bodies of two conquered demons.

