

# SAHASRA BUDDHA

Nirmal C. Sinha

## I

The only image permitted in Theravada temples is that of the historical Buddha, Gautama Sakya Muni. In Mahayana temples—in the Himalayas, Tibet and Mongolia—besides the historical Buddha designated simply Buddha (T. Sangay) or Sakya Muni (T. Sakya-Thubpa), there would be many images ranging from Three to Thousand according to size and resources of temple or monastery concerned. SahasraBuddha(T. Sangay Tongda) was no doubt the ideal count by 9th century A.D. when Mahayana pantheon was sculptured and painted in Samye (Central Tibet) and Tun Huang (northern outpost of ancient Tibetan empire). Sanskrit-Tibetan Lexicon *Mahavyutpatti* (Circa 820 A.D.) testifies to the usage of Sahasra Buddha as then current. In *Bhadrakalpa Sutra*, now available only in Tibetan translation, the number recorded is 1000.

The figures are those of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, historical and legendary, besides the Goddesses. Figures of patrons and protectors of Dharma would be permissible in paintings and iconography as such persons no doubt had taken the Refuge in Dharma (T.Cho) and believers would admire them if not adore them as Bodhisattvas (T. Changchub Sempa).

Since Dharmaraja (T. Chogyal) was Bodhisattva par-excellence and Asoka Maurya was the first and greatest Dharmaraja, Mahayana pantheon had a place of high honour for Asoka. Following the Indian tradition the first and greatest Chogyal of Tibet, Song-tsen Gampo was apotheosised. Mahayana was preached by Nagarjuna a contemporary of the Kushanas in North India and the Satavahanas in South India. This preaching by Nagarjuna was described by Mahayana believers as Second Turning of the Wheel of Law and Nagarjuna was in Mahayana tradition the Second Buddha. Nagarjuna and the Mahayana exponents like Aryadeva, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga and Dharmakirti were thus placed high in Mahayana pantheon. In Tibetan tradition Guru Padmasambhava, Atisa Dipankara and Tibetan saints like Marpa and Tsongkhapa were included in the pantheon and placed as high as Gautama Buddha or Nagarjuna. In fact a Guru like Padmasambhava or Tsongkhapa would dominate the gallery of icons or the

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In Roman transcription diacritical marks for Sanskrit and Tibetan words are omitted, except for quotes from other writers. Sanskrit words are spelt thus: Tathagata (for Tathāgata), Asoka (for Aśoka) or Nirmanakaya (for Nirmāṇakāya). Tibetan words are transcribed as pronounced thus: Lama (Blama), Sangay (for Sangs-rgyas) or Chogyal (for Chhos-rgyal).

portrayal of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in mural or scroll painting. In Mongolia Atisa Dipankara is equated to Gautama Buddha. In short for an ordinary believer or an average pilgrim the expression Sahasra Buddha (T. Sangay Tongda) was not exactly or approximately the names enumerated in a scripture like *Bhadrakalpasutra* (T. Dode Kalsang). The ordinary believer was as anxious to have a vision of Gautama Buddha as of the Guru known to him. The average pilgrim would esteem the Guru nearer and dearer than the historical Buddha. An ancient Tibetan adage runs thus: "When there was no Guru the name of Buddha was not known even". This was not unlike the Hindu tradition of venerating the Guru as Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesvara.

'Thousand' is no doubt a notional figure which could be less finite and more infinite. In all animate beings, Semchen Thamche, there would be Buddha potential, developing or developed. Whether well versed or not in *Avatamsaka Sutra* (available in Tibetan translation), a Mahayana believer feels that "there is not even one living being that has not the wisdom of the Tathagata. It is only because of the vain thoughts and affections that all beings are not conscious of this".

## II

The concept of multiple Buddha was not a Mahayana innovation. The concept is writ large in Pali, that is Hinayana Canon.

Gautama Buddha did not claim to be first Enlightened One; on the other hand he spoke of the previous Buddhas. *Samyutta Nikaya* records that Gautama emphatically asserted that his path of Enlightenment was not new and that there were a number of Enlightened Ones before him. He said "I have discovered an ancient path, the Buddhas of ancient times trod this path."

Seven Manusha Buddhas reported from Nepal, Tibet and Mongolia are: 1. Vipasyin, 2. Sikhin, 3. Visvabhu, 4. Krakuchanda, 5. Kanaka Muni, 6. Kasyapa and 7. Sakya Muni. Sanskrit *Saddharmapundarika* as well as Pali *Mahapadana Sutta* list the same names.

The six antecedent saints as precursors of Gautama Buddha may not be all myth. Firm unimpeachable testimony about Kanaka Muni is borne by no less an authority than Asoka Maurya. The Minor Pillar Edict from Nigali Sagar records thus: "When king Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin had been anointed fourteen years, he enlarged the Stupa of the Buddha Kanakamana to the double (of its original size).

"And when he had been anointed (twenty) years, he came himself and worshipped (this spot) (and) caused (a stone pillar to be set up)." Eng. Tr. Hultzsch.

The most celebrated among the precursors of Sakya Muni is Dipankara in Pali, Sanskrit as well as Tibetan traditions. In some reckoning Dipankara was the first Buddha and was the 24th predecessor of Buddha Sakya Muni. Obviously Dipankara was a figure of legendary past and could not be called

a Manusha Buddha in the period when Nirmanakaya concept was an established one.

If Dipankara was the greatest Tathagata before Gautama Buddha the concept of Tathagata itself is central to any discussion about the lineage of Buddhas or about the multiple Buddhas.

Tathagata would mean: (one) thus gone or (one) thus come. In Hinayana tradition, that is, Pali literature the meaning of this epithet is not clear though it was used in Gautama Buddha's life time, vide for example *Malunkya Putta Sutta*. The epithet was widely used later and it is widely used in Theravada countries today. Pali Nikayas suggest that the expression was pre-Buddhist and this suggestion is warranted if Gautama Buddha had at least six precursors. In Mahayana tradition Tathagata (T. Deshin-shekpa) meant 'one who was gone in the same way as his predecessors.

Whether called Tathagata or Buddha the number of such beings in Mahayana tradition would be infinite through all time; past, present and future. The concept of thousands of Buddhas grew in the first four centuries A.D., that is, from Nagarjuna onwards. The numerous Buddhas in the mystic vision of Mahayana saints are one; the myriad emerge from and merge into the Sunya (void), the Absolute in the teachings of Gautama Buddha and Nagarjuna.

8 | The doctrine of eternal and universal Buddha inspired the mystics' quest for a Primordial Form of Adi Buddha. The quest began with a single form like Samantabhadra or Vajradhara and culminated into five forms designated Pancha Tathagata or Pancha Jina in eighth century A.D.; centuries later in the Himalayas the five were called Pancha Dhyani Buddha. These are Vairochana or the Brilliant, Aksobhya or the Imperturbable, Ratnasambhava or the Jewel-born, Amitabha or the Infinite Light and Amoghasiddhi or the Unfailing Success.

These Five are spiritual offspring of the Primordial Form and these Five have their emanations or reflexes. These Five and their emanations have their own Consorts. All these figures originating in the vision or meditation of the mystic saints along with the Mundane Buddhas constitute the Mahayana pantheon conventionally called Sahasra Buddha or Thousand Buddhas. The pantheon thus has three tiers; the top tier is composed of the Five, the middle tier consists of further emanations or reflexes and the bottom tier is composed of the Historical Buddha and his precursors and successors. For the believers the Three tiers are three Bodies: Dharmakaya or the Cosmic Body, Sambhogakaya or the Body of Bliss, and Nirmanakaya or the Mundane Body.

### III

The Mahayana concept of Three Bodies was a development of the earlier concept of Two Bodies, namely, that Gautama Buddha had a Dharmakaya and a Rupakaya. Dharmakaya stood for Dharma as Buddha's real form and Rupakaya stood for Buddha's mundane or transitory form. In Mahayana

Rupakaya came to be designated Nirmanakaya and an intermediate Body designated Śambhogakaya emerged.

The Trikaya are: Dharmakaya or Cosmic Body which is Absolute or Reality; Sambhogakaya or Body of Bliss which in a personal manner blesses the believers; and Nirmanakaya or Mundane Body which appears on earth to teach Dharma.

The philosophy underlying the theology of Trikaya (T. Ku-sum) is well expressed in the words of TRV Murti.

"As the Dharmakāya, Buddha fully realises his identity with the Absolute (dharma-tā, śūnyatā) and unity (samatā) with all beings. It is the oneness with the Absolute that enables Buddha to intuit the Truth, which it is his sacred function to reveal to phenomenal beings. This is the fountain-source of his implicit strength which he concretises in the finite sphere. The Sambhoga Kāya is the concrete manifestation to himself (svasambhoga) and to the elect (paramsambhoga) the power and splendour of god-head. In furtherance of the great resolve to succour all beings, Buddha incarnates himself from time to time in forms best calculated to achieve this end (nirmāṇakāya)." *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism.*

The forms of the Five Tathagatas, Jinas or Buddhas and their emanations as also the different forms of the historical Buddhas are more relevant than their underlying philosophy in this account of the Mahayana Pantheon. The Five Buddhas represent or embody the five cosmic elements as the Five in totality are identical with the cosmos or universe. The five elements are Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space with Consciousness as the all pervasive overall element. The colour and forms of the Five Buddhas are given thus in Sadhana Mala "The Jinas (victorious ones) are Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi and Aksobhya. Their colours are white, yellow, red, green and blue and they exhibit the Bodhyangī (teaching), Varada (boon), Dhyāna (meditation), Abhaya (protection) and Bhūsparśa (earth touching) pose of hands respectively." Eng. tr. Bhattacharya.

If the Five Buddhas are portrayed in one canvas Vairocana is in centre with Aksobhya in east, Ratnasambhava in south, Amitābha in west and Amoghasiddhi in north. Their respective consorts are Vajradhātvisvari, Lochana, Mamaki, Pandara and Tara. Their respective emanations are Samantabhadra, Vajrapani, Ratnapani, Avalokitesvara and Visvapani.

Since Dharmakaya (T. Choku) is the Absolute, its form is Sunya and for the mystics a Kapali (skull) is the best Rupa for meditation. For other believers, one of the five primordial Buddhas—Vairocana (T. Nampor Nangzed), Aksobhya (T. Mitrukpa), Ratnasambhava (T. Rinchen Jugne), Amitābha (T. Opame) and Amoghasiddhi (T. Donye Dubpa)—is the sacred illustration of Dharmakaya. The symbols, pose of hands, or mode of sitting of a figure make the icon familiar.

The Sambhogakaya (T. Longchyo Zogku) are emanations from the five primordial Buddhas in their different forms. The number of such emanations by ninth century as recorded in Mahavyutpatti was ninetytwo. In *Nispannayogavali* a work of eleventh century the Bodhisattvas recognised as Sambhogakaya are fortyeight. Whatever was the final number—fortyeight, ninetytwo or more—all the four sects of Tibet agree in counting a set of eight as topmost. These are Manjusri (T. Jampalyang), Vajrapani (T. Chana Dorjee), Avalokitesvara (T. Chenrezi), Kshitigarbha (T. Sayi Ningpo), Sarvanivaranaviskambhi (T. Deppathamched Nampershelba), Akasagarbha (T. Namkhe Ningpo), Maitreya (T. Jampa) and Samantabhadra (T. Kuntu Sangpo). This is in conformity with the pre-ninth century Indian tradition.

The Sambhogakaya icons are, in the believer's esteem, far more concrete than the Dharmakaya figures. The believers adore the Samboghakaya Bodhisattvas as personal god-heads and experience in prayer and meditation no distance or impersonal quality as with the Sunyata (T. Tongpanyi). Manjusri the embodiment of Knowledge (Prajna/Sherab) was in the beginning the first or topmost. Later, sometime after sixth century, Avalokitesvara the embodiment of Compassion (Karuna/Ningje) came to occupy the top position among the celestial Bodhisattvas and finally emerged as the head of the entire Mahayana pantheon.

These celestial Bodhisattvas have their distinctive symbols and respective Consorts. They are depicted in various forms. Avalokitesvara has two popular forms: one four handed and other eleven headed. A total of one hundred and eight forms of Avalokitesvara are found in Nepal. Manjusri has no less than a dozen forms. Two forms of Manjusri are famous: one with Sword of Knowledge in right hand and Book of Knowledge in left hand and the other with two Wheels of law in his hands and riding the Lion of Knowledge in blue colour.

Tara is Consort of Avalokitesvara while Prajnaparamita is Consort of Manjusri. The Consort goddesses have also variant forms. Tara for example has a set of twenty one forms. Green Tara may be depicted in eight forms. The Consort deities need a separate notice. Here it is necessary to state that these feminine deities constitute the essential part of the esoteric mystic pantheon. Icons of Yuganaddha (T. Yab Yum) depicting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the embrace of their consorts, must be mentioned here as part and parcel of Sahasra Buddha; this theme of Yuganaddha also needs separate notice.

Nirmānakaya (T. Tulku) or Manusha Buddha par-excellence is Gautama Sakya Muni, the historical Buddha as distinct from a legendary Buddha or a Buddha of meditation. When Buddhism came to be recorded in stone, wood or plastic medium Gautama Buddha and his six precursors, described earlier, were depicted as Seven Mortal Buddhas. Meanwhile Mahayana

teachers like Nagarjuna came to be recognized as Manusha Buddha. Later in Tibet and Mongolia, Buddha Sakya Muni was adored as Dharmakaya after his Mahaparinirvana and the saints or teachers like Nagarjuna, Padmasambhava and Atisa would be cited as Nirmanakaya. Following the Indian tradition Tibetan saints like Marpa or Tsongkhapa would be depicted as iconic forms of Manusha Buddha. The first Tulkus (Nirmanakayas) to be recognized in Tibet were Chogyal Songtsen Gampo and his scholar minister Thumi Sambhota; the Chogyal was recognized as incarnation of Chenrezi (Avalokitesvara) and the minister was recognized as incarnation of Jampalyang (Manjusri). The Tibetan custom of recognizing incarnations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of meditation among the believers in Tibet was confirmed according to tradition by Atisa who was in Tibet (1042-1054).

Gautama Buddha may be depicted in various forms with varying modes of sittings, varying poses of hands with one or more Extraordinary Marks like the Ushnisa. The Buddhas or Bodhisattvas who came after Gautama Buddha were depicted with symbols or objects connected with their lives and teachings. Thus Nagarjuna is depicted usually as receiving the book of Prajnaparamita from the Naga princess, Padmasambhava with the Vajra (Dorje) or Thunderbolt in his right hand and a Kapali or skull in his left hand and Dipankara Atisa with a metal Stupa (T. Chorten) on his right and a wicker basket (containing scriptures) on his left. The Tulkus or incarnations in Tibet and Mongolia were fairly numerous and a good number of such Tulkus would also be accommodated in the pantheon depicted in murals or sculptures. All these figures can be identified by the symbols peculiar to them.

If a temple has only Three Images, the set may be of the Buddhas of Past, Present and Future, that is, Dipankara, Sakyamuni and Maitreya; or of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya. In Nepal Three Images representing Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are come across.

#### IV

Western visitors to the Himalayan monasteries often enquire about the comparative numerical superiority between Puranic Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist Pantheons. It is indeed a moot question which is difficult to answer categorically. Both Hindu and Mahayana deities passed through phenomenal proliferation for centuries. Finds of new deities or new variants of the deities are reported from time to time. A few years ago an Indian archaeologist reported the find of Avalokitesvara with twelve hands. Why and how numerous deities entered into the Mahayana Pantheon may be read from the point of view of Tantra. In the words of the leading scholar in the field, Benoy Tosh Bhattacharyya, the process may be described thus:

"The individual soul is known in Buddhism as the bodhisattva or bodhicitta, while the infinite of the universal Soul is called Sunya. When they combine in the state of the highest meditation and concentration, an artificial condition, in a way akin to deep sleep, is brought about, and the deity appears in the mind-sky in flashes and sparks. The nature of the Bodhicitta

being finite, it is not possible to realize the Infinite in its entirety, that is to say, the result of the mystic experience of the bodhicitta also remains finite. And as the object for which the worshipper sits in meditation is different in different cases, the deity visualized also becomes different. It is the bhāvanā (desire) of the worshipper, which is of the nature of psychic force, that reacts on the infinite Energy, giving rise to different manifestations according to the nature of reaction. The nature of this reaction is of illimitable variety, and thus the resultant deity also appears in an infinite variety of forms, and this is the chief reason why we find large number of gods and goddesses in the pantheons of both the Buddhists and the Hindus." (*The Cultural Heritage of India*, Volume I, Ch. Mahayana Pantheon).'

About the imagery of the deities Hindu and Mahayana concepts are not identical. The Puranic Hindu view was that the Devas were actually present on this earth in the ancient most past and that the Devas gradually left this earth as not worthy for their stay and were merged in the ether. A concise notice from the Puranic text *Viṣṇudharmottara* was made by JN Banerjee thus:

"The *Viṣṇudharmottara* tells us that the gods were worshipped in their visible forms, not images, in the Satya yuga; in the Treta and Dvapara yugas, worship was done both in their visible forms and in their images. In the treta yuga they were worshipped in the house and in the dvapara in the forest; in the Kali yuga, however, the practice of building houses of gods (i.e. temples) in town was begun. The enshrinement of the gods (i.e. their images) should be done in land suitable for such purpose, which should be donated according to the rules followed in gifts of Lands." *The Development of Hindu Iconography*.

In Mahayana Tantra the images or forms of the deities were as in the vision or meditation of the Mahasiddha (master mystic). The artist whether from the clergy or from the laity had to draw or depict the image to the satisfaction of the mystic. The mystic process of visualisation of the deity is described in *Advayavajra Sangraha* thus:

"The form of the deity is an expression of the sunya. Such expressions are by nature non-existent. Whatever there is as expression, it must be sunya in essence."

"From the right perception of sunyata proceeds the germ-syllable; from the germ-syllable proceeds the conception of an icon; and from the icon, its external representations. The whole process therefore is one of dependent origination". Eng. Tr. Bhattacharyya.

It may be noted that as in prayer or meditation so in painting or sculpture, Gautama Buddha's basic teaching of Pratitya-Samutpada (T. Tendal) was the inspiration to realize excellence. Modern aesthetics may or may not appreciate this process but must listen to the believer's word if unrealistic, grotesque forms are to be understood. A free translation of an ancient saying chanted by the believers may be made: "One who perceives the Cause and Effect nexus perceives the Truth, One who perceives the Truth perceives the Buddha".

(1)

द्वेवानंपिथेन पिथद्वसिन लाजिन चौद्वसवशाभिसितेन  
बुधस कोनाकमनस थुबे द्वुतियं वदिते  
....साभिसितेन च अतन आगाच महीयते.  
.... पापिते

अशोक अनुशासनः निगाली सागर

(2) गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णु गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः ।  
गुरुरेव परं ब्रह्म तस्मै श्री गुरवे नमः ॥

(3) देवीभागवत्

सत्ययुगे देवानां प्रत्यक्षपूजनं - त्रेताद्वापरयोः  
प्रत्यक्षपूजा प्रतिमासु च - तत्रापि त्रेतायुगे गृहे  
द्वापरे चरण्ये - क्लौ च देवायतननिर्मितिर्नगरेषु  
समारब्धा, भूमिद्वानं विधायैव देवायतनप्रतिष्ठा  
कार्या, देवालययोग्यभूमि.... ।

(4) विष्णुधर्मोत्तर

स्फूर्तिश्च देवताकारा निःस्वभावाः स्वभावतः ।  
यथा यथा भवेत् स्फूर्तिः सा तथा शून्यतात्मिका ॥

शून्यतावोधितौ बीजं बीजाद्धिम्बं प्रजायते ।  
बिम्बे च न्यासविन्यासौ तस्मात्सर्वं प्रतीत्यजम् ॥  
अद्वयवज्रसंग्रह ॥



(5)  
जिनो वैशेचनो रव्यातो रत्नसम्भव एव च ।  
अमिताभामोघसिद्धिरत्नोभ्यश्च प्रकीर्तितः

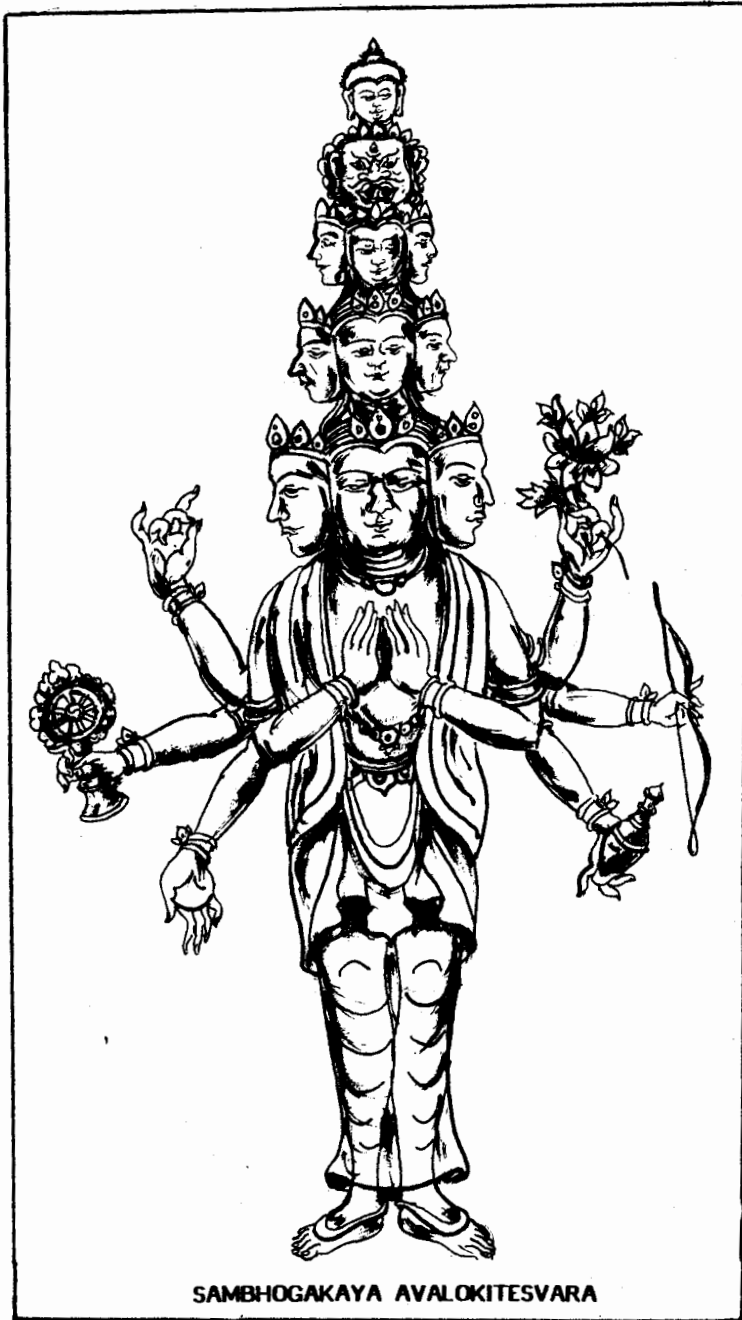
वर्णा अमीषां सितः पीतो रक्तो हरितमैचकौ ।  
बौध्यङ्गी वरदो ध्यानं मुदा अभय-भूस्पर्शी ॥

(6) साधनमाला  
यः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादं पन्थति स धर्मं पन्थति ।  
यः धर्मं पन्थति स बुद्धं पन्थति ॥

बुद्धवचन



**DHARMAKAYA AMITABHA**



SAMBHOGAKAYA AVALOKITESVARA

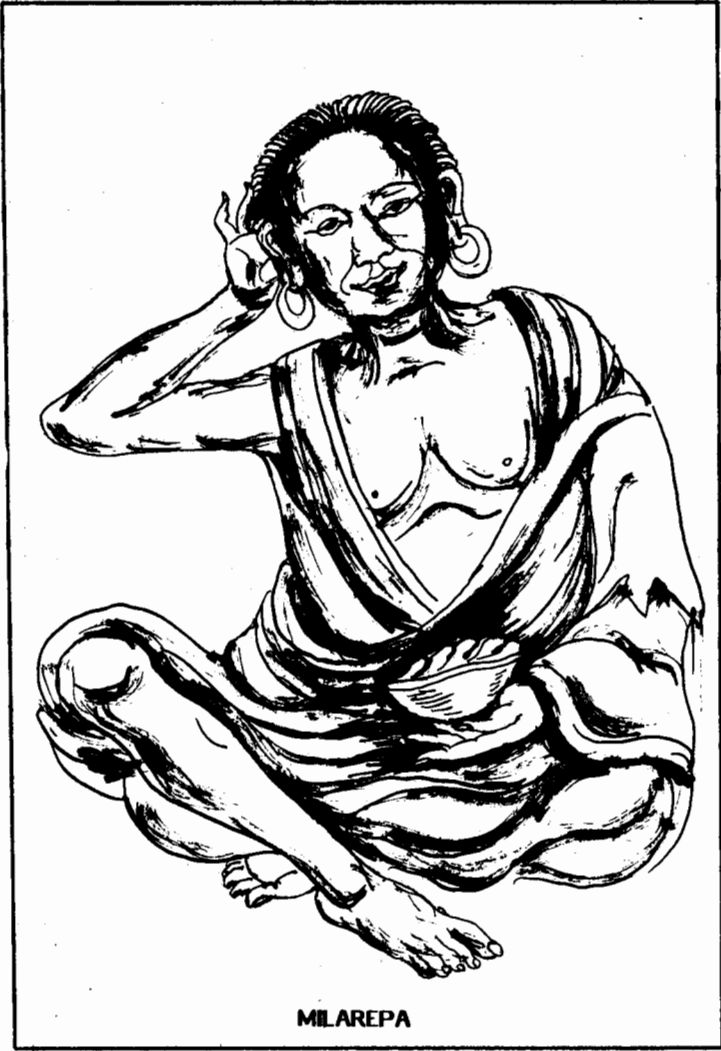


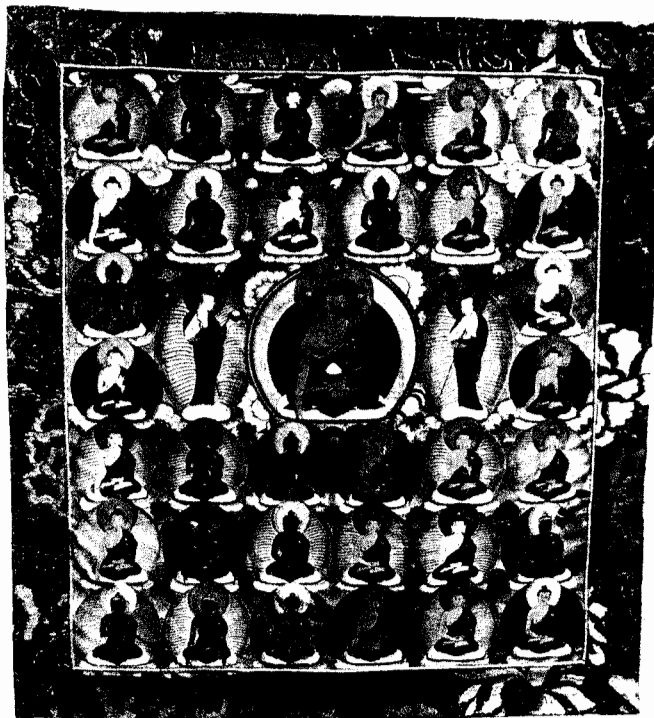
**NIRMANAKAYA SAKYAMUNI**



PADMASAMBHAVA

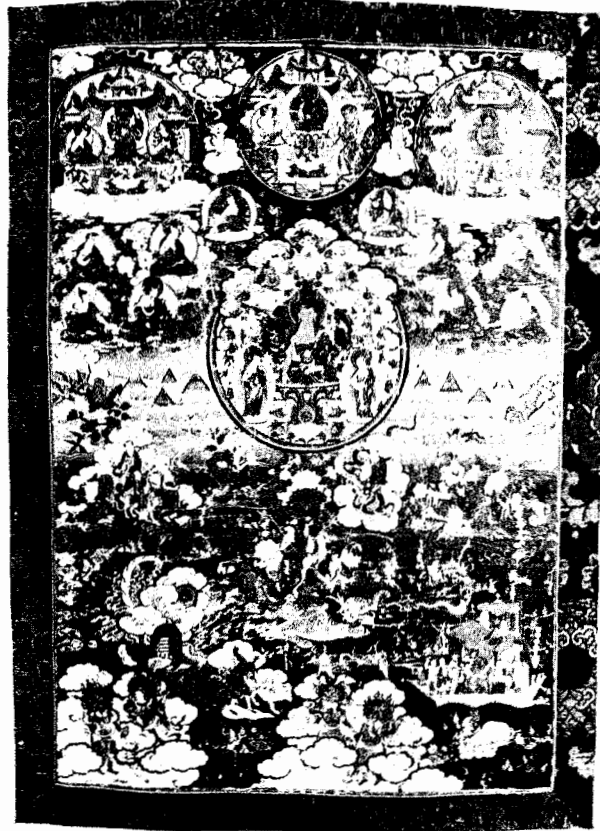




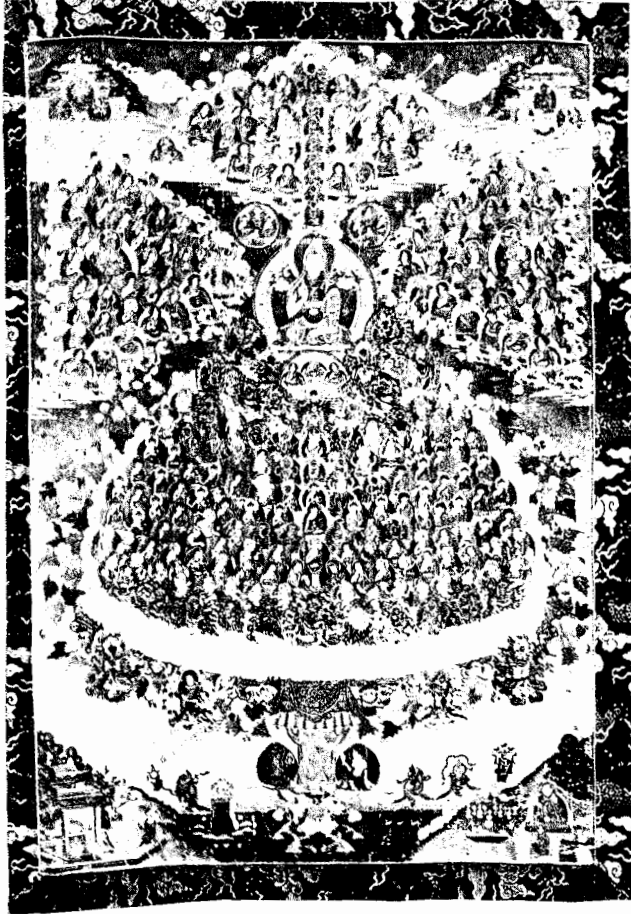


TUNG SHA  
Thirtyfive Buddhas who receive confession





GAUTAMA SAKYAMUNI & OTHER BUDDHAS  
including celestial Buddhas  
Bodhisattvas and Master Exponents



TSHOG ZHING  
Assembly of Buddhas : Tsongkhapa in centre



SIPA'I KHORLO

Wheel of Life depicting six worlds of existence