

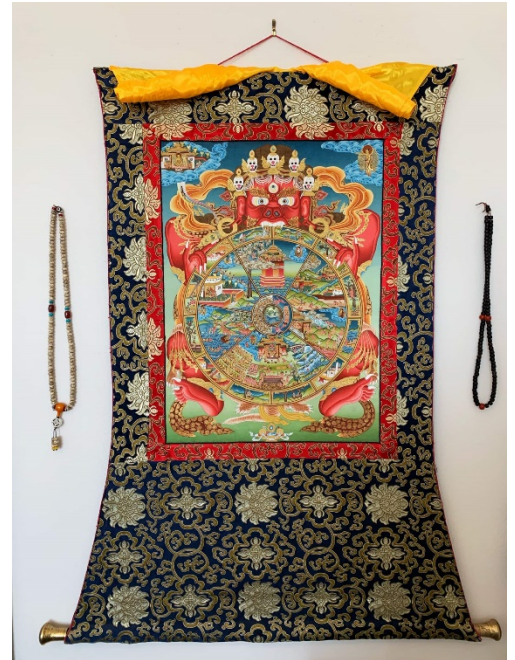
TIBETAN THANGKAS

1. WHAT IS A THANGKA?

Thangkas are Tibetan-Buddhist religious scroll paintings. Drawing on Indian (Oriya & Bengali Patachitra painting - Ann Shaftel, art conservation specialist) and later Nepali and Chinese influences, it has been around since at least the 7th century. They are pictures of the mandala used for visualizations, visual narratives on the lives of saints, masters, and many manifestations of the Buddha, and, and used as meditational and teaching tools, as much as they are striking works of art.

Thangkas are mainly painted (or embroidered) onto linen or cotton fabric using animal (yak, sheep or oxen) glue and naturally occurring mineral pigments, such as malachite, cinnabar, arsenic sulphide, and azurite. They are mounted on brocade, with a further silk cover on the front, and traditionally kept unframed and rolled up between two sticks when not on display. It is kept in dry places to preserve the quality of the fabric and protect it from moisture and only brought out and unrolled at special occasions such as weddings, deaths, or major Buddhist festivals – some surviving thangkas date back to the 11th century.

The term is also sometimes used for works in other media than painting and embroidery, including reliefs in metal and woodblock prints.



2. SIZE OF THANGKAS:

Most **thangkas** are relatively **small**, in widths from 16-23 inches. Those wider than 17 or 18 inches frequently have seams in the support. There are also larger than average thangkas designed for altars or display in temples.

There are also extremely **large** (gheku or koku or thongdrel), festival **thangkas**, usually appliqué, and are unrolled and displayed for very brief periods on a monastery wall as part of religious festivals. Can be 60 feet wide and 20 feet tall. These are likely to be wider than they are tall, and may be **(60'-0")** sixty or more feet across and perhaps twenty **(20'-0")** or higher.



CRITERIA FOR ARTISTS:

Thangka artists are usually Tibetan Buddhists who spend at least six years studying the art, although all monks are trained in **thangka** painting as well. The artist must be trained and have sufficient religious understanding, knowledge, and background to create an accurate and appropriate thangka. "The painter has to have good motivation" when painting the thangka in order for it to be considered "good" (Wein, 2016).

Self-expression is not the purpose of Tibetan art – **art represents the path of enlightenment and nirvana**. Personal expression is seen as an obstacle's to art's true purpose. The creation of the art itself is a form of meditation and deeply symbolic, and the artist is generally kept anonymous.

Artists perform meditation/mantra recitation during the painting process. The very act of painting is both a ritual and a meditation. Mantras recited during creation are considered enlightened actions for both the artist and the patron. After completion, a consecration ceremony is performed by monks. (Mum's Uncle, Pema Lama painted Chengrezis (Avalokiteshvara Bodhisatva, embodying Buddha's compassion, on order). **They also inscribe religious inscriptions on the back of the paintings**, thus bringing the deity to "life". It is through this process that the thangka painting becomes a **sacred, religious tool** for both personal meditation and for teaching purposes (instruction of monastic students).

The backgrounds, in contrast to the figures, are up to the **artist's discretion**, although these often follow similar styles.

The process seems very methodical, but often requires deep understanding of the symbolism involved (of Buddhist philosophy) to capture the spirit of it.

"The role of the artist is somewhat different than the inventor of the West. The role of the artist becomes one of a medium or channel, who rises above his own mundane consciousness to bring a higher truth into this world." This dual status for the artist as anonymous craftsman and a creative, learned, and meditative medium is key to understanding the complexity of the role and identity of the Tibetan artist. This sets up a paradox in the nature of Tibetan artistic identity: artists on the one hand, are creating paintings for a religious purpose, under a system dictated by the Buddhist aristocracy; and yet these artists are not considered instruments of a repetitive, stagnant art form, rather are actively engaged individuals celebrating their own path to enlightenment.

3. WHO COMMISSIONED/ USED THANGKAS?

Thangkas were originally intended for personal meditation or instruction of monastic students.

In the past, the smaller **thangkas** were commissioned by religious establishments or pious individuals for use within the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Traditionally, traveling teachers or lamas would go to villages and monasteries on yaks, unroll a thangka scroll and explain the message contained in the painting to a population that was mainly illiterate. In this way, thangka is an art form uniquely suited to the nomadic culture it evolved within - mainly in Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and China. (Thangkas were painted in all the areas where Tibetan Buddhism thrived, including Mongolia, Ladakh, Sikkim, Darjeeling, and parts of Himalayan India in Arunachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, and Lahaul and Spiti district in Himachal Pradesh. It is also practiced in parts of Russia (Kalmykia, Buryatia, and Tuva) and Northeast China.

Other traditions of Buddhist scroll paintings are not called thangka, although they may have many similarities, and descend from the same origins.

Today, poster size prints of **thangkas** are commonly used for devotional as well as decorative purposes since authentic **thangkas** are expensive. These days even though **thangkas** have been commercialized and are available for sale, more accessible to tourists from the West than devout followers of Tibetan Buddhists, it is

considered acceptable as a way for the world to know more about Buddhism, and for a way for impoverished artists to make a living.

4. **COMPOSITION:**

Thangkas often have elaborate compositions including many very-small figures. **The composition of a *thangka***, is highly geometric, filled with symbolism and allusion, in accordance with strict guidelines in Buddhist scripture regarding proportions, shape, color, stance, hand positions, and attributes laid out on a systematic grid of angles & intersecting lines.

It usually depicts a central Buddhist deity or teacher surrounded by associated gods and lineage figures, or describes events, and are **visual representation of philosophical aspects of Buddhism** ; or outlines the blueprint of a particular deity's realm as a *mandala*.*

***MANDALA** - a spiritual and ritual symbolic geometric design which represents different aspects of the universe and is used as instruments of meditation. It can be understood in two different ways: **externally** as a visual representation of the universe, or **internally** as a guide for several practices including meditation. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the belief is that by entering the mandala and proceeding towards its center, you are guided through the cosmic process of transforming the universe from one of suffering into one of joy and happiness

5. **FUNCTION:** (teaching and meditating tool, and for rituals)

1. *Thangka* serve as important **teaching tools** depicting:
 - (i) Images of deities can be used as teaching tools when depicting the life (or lives) of the Buddha
 - (ii) describing historical events concerning important Lamas, or lineage masters
 - (iii) retelling myths associated with other deities (which are personifications of virtues) – the myths are used explain Buddhist philosophy (to a populace that were most illiterate in the past).
 - (iv) Wheel of Life (*Bhavachakra*), a visual representation of the *Abhidharma* teachings (Art of Enlightenment).
2. **Rituals:** Devotional images act as the centerpiece during a ritual or ceremony and are often used as mediums through which one can offer prayers or make requests.
3. It is a **meditation tool** to help bring one further down the path to enlightenment. The Buddhist *Vajrayana* practitioner uses a *thangka* image of their *vidam*, or meditation deity, as a guide, by visualizing "themselves as being that deity, thereby internalizing the Buddha qualities". *Thangkas* hang on or beside altars, hung in the bedrooms or offices of monks and devotees.

6. **WHY STUDY THANGKAS IN ART?**

The Tibetan *thangka* painting as an art form is important because it forces the art scholar to see a different perspective vis-a-vis who is considered an artist vs. an artisan, what is considered art vs. folk-art. Deeply meaningful and spiritual, it should not be dismissed without proper understanding by the Western world that seems to be in control of all artistic standards for the whole world. It forces us to see that there are other standards and points of view out there beyond individual and creative expression. This Outsider art should definitely be called insider art.

(P.S.) Contemporary Tibetan art of modern Tibet, or Tibet after 1950, or art by the Tibetan diaspora is explicitly political and religious in nature. Contemporary Tibetan art includes modern *thangka* (religious scroll paintings) that resemble ancient *thangka*, as well as radical, avant-garde, works.)

THE PROCESS OF MAKING THANGKAS

The process of creating a **thangka** painting is multifaceted and labor intensive. All **thangka** paintings follow a similar process:

First, linen or cotton is cut to the size of a pre-made wooden frame and stretched, and stiffened with yak hide glue, and coated with a mix of chalk and lime (gesso)

second, the measurement of the deity and figures iconography bound by strict mathematical measurements, (the proportions vary by master teacher and school) are computed. The composition of a thangka is highly geometric. Arms, legs, eyes, nostrils, ears, and various ritual implements are all laid out on a systematic grid of angles and intersecting lines. A skilled thangka artist selects from a predesigned items to include in the composition, ranging from alms bowls and animals, to the shape, size, and angle of a figure's eyes, nose, and lips.

third, a grid is drawn on the fabric and the charcoal sketch made, starting from the central figure outwards

fourth, the application of flat, color (mineral & organic pigments used in a water-soluble medium of yak-hide glue - azurite for blue, HgS cinnabar for red, sulphur for yellow) one at a time in a specific sky-to-foreground order. The colours of the deities are bound by strict rules, but not the background. The paint is applied as a warm liquid, mixed shortly before application.

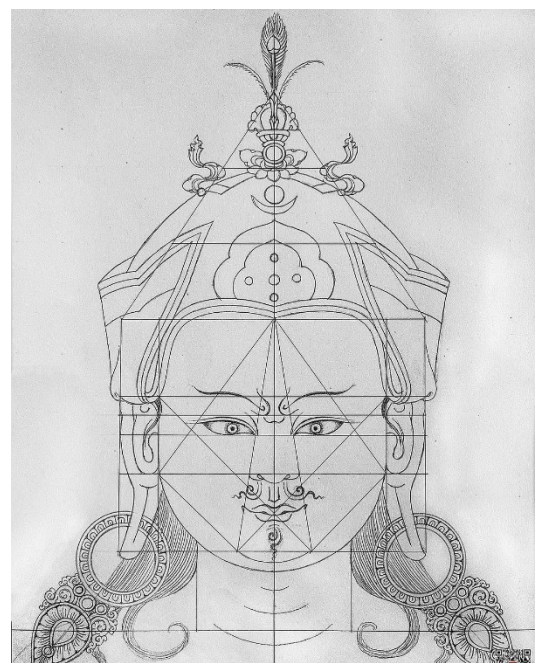
fifth, the outlining of figures and objects.

sixth, the shading of the entire painting.

seventh, the gold ornamentation. In Nepal, 24 carat gold is also plated over some parts of **Thangkas** painting.

eighth, the mounting of the painting onto silk or brocade backing of three colours, and a protective curtain

nineth, the consecration ceremony or "**cenje**" in which the living embodiment of the painted deity is "opened" (filling in of the eyes painted last in the opening eye ceremony), therefore the painting actually *becomes* the deity itself.





TYPES OF THANGKAS

Based on technique and material, **thangkas** can be grouped by types. They are generally divided into two broad categories: those that are painted (Tib.) *bris-tan*—and those made of silk, either by appliqué or embroidery.

Thangkas are further divided into more specific categories:

- Painted in colours (Tib.) **tson-tang**—the most common type
- Appliqué (Tib.) **go-tang**
- Black Background—meaning gold line on a black background (Tib.) **nagtang**
- Block prints—paper or cloth outlined renderings, by woodcut/woodblock printing
- Embroidery (Tib.) **tsem-thang**
- Gold Background—an auspicious treatment, used judiciously for peaceful, long-life deities and fully enlightened buddhas
- Red Background—literally gold line, but refers to gold line on a vermillion background (Tib.) **mar-tang**

Somewhat related are Tibetan **tsakli**, cards which look like miniature **thangkas** perhaps up to 15 centimetres high, and often square, usually containing a single figure. These were mostly produced in sets and were usually used in earlier stages of training monks, or as initiation cards or offerings, or to use when constructing temporary mandalas. Another related form is the painted wooden top cover for a manuscript book, giving a long narrow strip, typically some 6 cm by 55 cm, often painted with a row of seated figures in compartments. The techniques for both these forms are essentially the same as for **thangka**, and presumably the same artists worked on them. Because **thangkas** can be quite expensive, people nowadays use posters of **thangkas** as an alternative to the real **thangkas** for religious purposes.

Sources on Asian art often describe all-textile **thangkas** as "tapestry", but **thangkas** that meet the normal definition of tapestry with the image created only by weaving a single piece of fabric with different colours of thread are extremely rare, though a few tapestry examples in the Chinese **kesi** technique are known, mostly from the medieval period. There is a large example in the Hermitage Museum, although in this and other

pieces the different colours are woven separately and then sewn together in a type of patchwork. Most **thangka** described as tapestry are some combination of embroidery, appliqué and other techniques.

A LOOK AT 3 THANGKA PAINTINGS



Thangka 1: Samatha Meditation Thangka

Samatha Meditation Thangka - Samatha means calm and with Vipassana is one of the fundamental meditation practices of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. (Vipassana, means to see things as they really are, is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. It was rediscovered by Gautam Buddha more than 2500 years ago and was taught by him as a universal remedy for universal ills, i.e., an Art Of Living. This non-sectarian technique aims for the total eradication of mental impurities and the resultant highest happiness of full liberation.)

This Thangka painting illustrates the different stages of the Samatha meditation showing a monk chasing and finally capturing an elephant. The elephant, representing the mind, is led by a monkey representing the distractions.

Gradually both the monkey and the elephant change color, a metaphor of the ability of the practitioner through his effort (the fire of knowledge) to purify the lethargic tendencies of the mind. Even a rabbit turns and looks at the monk to indicate that distractions acknowledge who is in charge.

In the following stages the monk starts leading the elephant. The monkey now follows the elephant rather than leading it and the rabbit disappears. Finally the mind is under control and pacified.

Afterwards, the monkey leaves the elephant and stands behind the monk saluting him with reverence.

The last stage shows the elephant resting aside the monk who sits at ease. Now the path has ended and a rainbow streams out of the monk's heart. Perfect equanimity (calmness) is found and the practitioner is ready to cross over into mental bliss.



The monk rides the elephant along the rainbow path into the perfection of the transcendent realm and returns bearing the sword of Wisdom.

Thangka 2: The 21 Taras



The 21 Taras – Tara has 21 fundamental emanations according to the mantra of the Buddha Samantabhadra called “Twenty-One Praises of Tara”. <https://fpmt.org/wp-content/uploads/prayers/21tarasltrdr.pdf> Each form of the mother of all Buddhas has a specific color and serves to a specific function. Each of the twenty-one emanations of Tara has her own name, and a specific mantra with which she is associated, offering protection from various types of fears, harm, and calamities.

However there are different styles and designs of thangka paintings that represent the **21 manifestations of Tara** based on distinct lineages and practices, in which forms, colors, ritual objects and even names or functions can vary.

In most thangka paintings of the Twenty-one Taras, the Green Tara is placed in the center of the composition but in some thangkas the central position can be occupied by Red Tara or White Tara. The one we have is green in the centre.

The lineages that refer to the “21 Tara systems” are Suryagupta (the oldest system), Atisha (the most common), Longchen Nyingtig, Chogyur Lingpa and Sadhana-samucchaya traditions. However there are other lineages that present different configurations and practices.

Green is symbol of action, achievement and considered the primary color of Tara as her green manifestation is always depicted in the center of this thangka.

White represents the appeasing function to overcome sickness and obstacles in life and during the Dharma practice.

Yellow represents the activity of increasing the positive qualities and achieve a long and peaceful life, happiness and success in the practice.

Red is symbol of power and connected to the ability to overcome external forces that cannot be faced through the first two functions.

Black or Blue represents the forceful and wrathful functions and methods to accomplish enlightened purposes that cannot be accomplished through other means.

By singing the praise of the 21 Taras and meditating to her different emanations the practitioner distances himself from fear, fights all the negative feelings that burdens his heart and ultimately reaches enlightenment.

Thangka 3: The Life of Gautam Buddha

The Life of Gautam Buddha - The thangka paintings of the Life of Buddha narrate the most relevant episodes of the life of Siddhartha known as the “Twelve Great Deeds of the Buddha’s Life”.

These artworks are not meant to be just an illustration of the main events of the historical Buddha, but they are considered to be a visual representation of several philosophical aspects of the Buddhism, especially the progress towards the achievement of spiritual enlightenment.



**The life of the Buddha explained using another thangka from the web
(cut and pasted):**



Center detail of the Life of Buddha thangka painting



Using as a reference one of the most beautiful masterpiece in our collection, we will explore in this article the **twelve topic events of the life of Siddhartha Gautama** that can be divided in three distinct phases:

- His descent on earth, the birth and the young years as a prince.
- The realization of human suffering and his quest for a solution to overcome his suffering.
- The fulfillment of his search and his commitment to spend the rest of his life teaching others how to achieve enlightenment for themselves.

1. Buddha's promise to descend on earth.

According to the Buddhist cosmogony the universe

and all dimensions of the existence are divided in six different realms depicted in another important thangka painting: the Wheel of Life.

Before the Buddha was born into this world as Shakyamuni, he was a *bodhisattva* in the Tushita heaven, home of the contented gods. As a prime example of bodhisattva, moved by compassion for the human realm, Buddha decides to manifest himself in this reality with the intention to teach Dharma and save people from spiritual misery and suffering. This episode is represented by the Buddha, surrounded by other divinities, making his promise holding a golden bowl (in some cases a lotus flower) symbol of the purity of his intention.

Buddha in heaven and his descent on earth

Thus, Buddha, looking down upon the sentient beings suffering and, in accordance with his bodhisattva status, decided to descend to the earth and spread the word of Dharma.

2. Mayadevi's Dream.

Buddha's descent to this world is represented by his mother, the princess **Maya Devi**, dreaming a white elephant. The legend says that during one night of full moon, Maya Devi dreamed to be taken by four *devas* (spirits) to a lake in the Himalaya. There she encountered a white elephant that ripped the right side of her belly with his tusks. Finally the elephant disappeared and the queen awoke, knowing that she had been delivered an important message, as the elephant is a symbol of greatness in Nepal.



Princess Mayadevi dreaming the white elephant

The elephant is also symbol of strength and intelligence and his color is associated to the gray clouds that carry the rain able to give life to the soil. So the white elephant, in this allegory, is an emblem of fertility and at same time of immaculacy.

3. The Birth of Buddha.



After ten months of pregnancy Maya Devi went to her father's kingdom and deliver the baby with the assistance of her mother. However on the way to her childhood home, she decides to stop in a beautiful garden in Lumbini and take a rest underneath a blossoming sala tree.

The story says that Buddha was born from her mother's right side while she was standing grasping a branch of the tree. This peculiar position assumed by Maya Devi influenced the female iconography all over Asia. The sinuous gesture is been adopted by traditional dance choreographic and inspired several generations of artists.

The depiction of the event also shows the presence of the Hindu gods Indra and Brahma at the time of birth.

Buddha was immediately able to walk. In fact he took seven steps forward and at each step a lotus flower appeared on the ground.

The birth of Buddha

He was named **Siddhartha Gautama**. In Sanskrit Siddhartha means "the One who achieves his goal". The princess Maya Devi will die seven days after Buddha was born.

4. Buddha's early years and his worldly life.



Little is known about the early life of prince Siddhartha. Because his father had been warned that the boy might abandon his palace and his royal destiny to follow a spiritual path, the young Siddhartha lived a comfortable and sheltered life. He received the finest education and mastered all lessons taught to him. In his younger years he also excelled in sports, particularly riding the horse and with the bow. He had the reputation to be also physically extraordinary attractive. When he came of age and assumed royal duties, prince Siddhartha became a true man of the world and had a retinue of many queens and attendant ladies.

Young prince Siddhartha in the palace

In the second part we explore the episodes that led Siddhartha to start his ascetic life and his quest for a solution to human suffering.

The four Encounters.

Having been warned by the court astrologers that his son may well give it all up and choose the path of meditation, Buddha's father tried his best to shield him from the harsh realities of life. This state of affairs continued until one day, Siddhartha decides to leave the palace with one of his servants driving the chariot. During his journey the prince encounters an old man, a sick man and a dead man leading to great turbulence in his mind. He also comes across an ascetic monk and after questioning him Gautama decides to follow his example, convinced that herein lay the way to quell his mental agitation.



Buddha's encounters out of the palace

Having made the decision, Siddhartha leaves the palace to pursue his quest and find the truth about life, suffering and genuine happiness.

6. Siddhartha leaves the palace and starts his ascetic experience.

According to the legend Gautama left the luxurious palace of his father in the middle of the night, leaving behind his sleeping wife and son. The first thing that Siddhartha did after leaving his home was to cut his long and beautiful hair. his episode is depicted in the thangka painting in representation of Buddha's strong commitment.



Buddha cuts his hair and starts his ascetic experience

Dressed as a beggar, the young prince wanders from place to place with his begging bowl. During this time Siddhartha encounters several teachers and he learns how to meditate. Despite what he had learnt he could see that he was still subject to old age, sickness, and death and that his quest was not over.

7. The six years of austerity

Wandering in his search for enlightenment, Buddha came to a pleasant hermitage by a lovely stream where he joined five mendicants practicing a discipline based on severe fasting. The legend says that he ate a single grain of rice for each of the first two years, drank a single drop of water for each of the second two years, and took nothing at all during the last two. For six long years he did these practices becoming so skinny that when he touched his stomach, he could almost feel his spine.

The thangka shows Buddha sitting in lotus position meditating under a tree with his body severely affected by this experience.



Fasting Buddha in lotus position

In spite of the great pain and suffering Gautama did not find wisdom or the answers to his questions so he decides to go back begging for food and build up his body.

8. Striving for enlightenment



Gautama went to Gaya and looked for a suitable place to sit down and meditate. He found a banyan tree and sat on its east side. There he met a village girl named Sujata who offered him a bowl of rice. It was the first food he had accepted in years and it instantly restored his body to lustrous good health. Sujata was so happy and excited that the holy man accepted her food so she starts dancing with joy and comes back in company of her servant with more offering as illustrated in the painting.

Buddha under the bodhi tree in Gaya

Abandoning himself to meditation, Gautama vowed not to move from that spot until he had attained full enlightenment.

In the next part we will explore the episodes that led Siddhartha to fulfill his search and his commitment to spend the rest of his life teaching others how to achieve enlightenment for themselves. (This part with 9-12 is missing)

History of Gautama Buddha

According to the documents written down more than two hundred years after Buddha's death, his mother, Maya Devi, an Indian queen, one day dreamed that she would become pregnant from a white elephant touching her right side with its trunk. In Indian mythology, elephants are seen as strong and fertile beings. And white is seen as a sign of purity and immaculacy.

The Birth of Buddha

According to the legend, Queen Maya was pregnant for 10 months. When she was aware that her time was near, she followed an old custom and went on a journey to her parents' home in Nepal.

However, before reaching her parents' home, she gave birth to her son in a garden in Lumbini, in today's Nepal. Queen Maya grabbed the branch of a tree and Buddha was born by coming out of her right side, the way he was conceived. Queen Maya Devi died seven days later. There have been discussions among scholars if the historical birth of Buddha may have been by caesarian section

Life at Court

Gautama Siddhartha grew up behind high court walls, well protected from the ugliness of the real world of average people. He could have enjoyed the luxurious life of a rich prince. But he was not happy.

To distract him his father wanted the prince to marry. A tournament was organized as a test who was the strongest and best marriage candidate for Princess Gopi. In one contest, Buddha's rivals killed a white elephant. However, Buddha, repelled by the senseless killing, tossed the elephant over the palace wall and brought it back to life.

Prince Siddhartha Encounters Suffering

One day the prince left the palace and realized what real life was. He saw poverty, illness, the fate of aging and he saw a burial of a deceased person. Buddha recognized that there was suffering outside the luxury of the palace.

Prince Siddhartha Leaves the Palace Forever

Prince Siddhartha, in the meantime 29 years old, married and father of one son, decided to leave the palace to find an answer why there is suffering in the world and how to free the world from it. Secretly at night he left the palace on horseback and accompanied by a servant. Once he was far away from the palace, he sent the servant with the horseback. Buddha took the seat in front of a stupa and cut his long hair off and dressed like a monk to begin the life of a simple student under different guru teachers.

Ascetism and Meditation

For six years the Buddha practiced asceticism under different guru masters. But after six years he and his friends who accompanied him were close to death due to extreme asceticism. But Buddha recognized that this did not take him anywhere closer to understand the mechanisms of this world.

After 6 years of fruitless ascetism, the Buddha decided to eat again. This is what Buddhists call the "middle way", avoiding extremes to both sides. Buddha began to meditate under a large tree.

Buddha's Enlightenment

After several weeks of meditation Buddha finally found enlightenment by understanding the causes of suffering and how to end suffering.

Mara's Attack

This was the right moment for Demon Mara to enter the stage. Mara is a kind of incarnation of the evil, the devil so to say. Mara does not want Buddha to find enlightenment and does his best to prevent it. He sends evil monsters who shoot with arrows at the Buddha. But the arrows turn into flowers. Finally, he sends his beautiful daughters to seduce the Buddha. But the beautiful young ladies turn into old, ugly women.

Teachings

After having found enlightenment the Buddha spent the rest of his life traveling in Nepal, Northern India and teaching his findings and principles.

Nirvana

At the age of roughly 80 years, the historical Buddha passed away. As he had reached the state of enlightenment, he passed into nirvana. For Buddhists, nirvana is the final bliss, the end of the cycle of rebirths and the end of all suffering.

Buddha Life

In the center of all Buddha Life thangkas, one finds always the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. He is shown with a beggar's bowl in his left hand and with his right hand calling the earth as the witness, a scene from the story of Mara's attack.

The details of a Buddha Life thangka may vary and even the different scenes may not always be found in the same place. But the basic pattern is always the same.

(SUMAN GANAPATHY – SYNTHESIZED FROM VARIOUS SOURCES IN THE WEB)