To begin, I would like to pay tribute to those dear to me, without whom nothing would have been possible:

First of all, my parents, Marcelle and Jacques Bordier, and my wife, Françoise, who, each in their own way, have supported and inspired me throughout my life.

To all those whom I have had the good fortune and privilege of meeting during my forty years wandering across India, Tibet, and South-East Asia, and who share my sensitivity and love for Asia and its primarily religious art.

To the dealers, in particular, with whom I spent a significant amount of my time, sitting in their stores or wandering through shops overflowing with wonders. They had the patience and generosity to show and explain tens of thousands of artworks to me, and it is largely thanks to them that I acquired my experience and knowledge. I would have liked to name them all here, but I am sure that they will recognize themselves in this anonymous address.

To my literary companions, Magali Jenny, Jean-Marc Falcombello and Etienne Bock, who brought to life my travels in Tibet, Milarepa's teachings and the objects of my collection, as well as to Agathe Chevalier who faithfully translated them into English.

Finally, I would like to deeply thank and pay tribute to all the Tibetans who—thanks to the inspiration of the mountains, shamanism, and of course Buddhism, and through the presence of monks, lamas, and artists—have created objects that have never ceased to fascinate and move me throughout my life.

Alain Bordier

NOTE TO THE READER

This book speaks to the heart, mind, and soul. Mixing autobiographical, technical, artistic, religious, and spiritual elements, it can be explored by reading its chapters sequentially or according to your specific areas of interest. It originates from *The Black Treasury*: an ancient and sumptuously illuminated unpublished manuscript, narrating the life and songs of the holy yogi and poet Milarepa.

This publication is the result of subjective choices. It will take you on a guided journey into the extraordinary world of Himalayan religious art and Vajrayāna Buddhism in three stages:

- the first section, written by Magali Jenny, begins with the story of Alain Bordier's travels, his collection, and the genesis of the museum;

- in order to present a general overview of Tibetan religious thought, art, and history, the rest of the book is divided into nine chapters, each devoted to a particular theme. This didactic section written by Étienne Bock is based on the works in the collection. It aims to provide an understanding of the meaning and symbolism of Tibetan art;

- associated with these themes, each chapter is punctuated by stories from the famous yogi Milarepa's life, a thread which runs throughout the book. Inspired by parts of *The Black Treasury* manuscript translated and commented by Jean-Marc Falcombello, these stories aim to provide a new vision of Milarepa's illustrious life, based on the living tradition of Buddhist masters.

As an illustrated book, as much space is given to the images as to the text.

With its three interweaving levels of reading, this book is like a chimera, a fabulous creature made up of parts of various animals. Conceived and written by three brains and six hands, it could be the work of one of those tantric deities with multiple limbs but a single mind.

The book is not intended to proselytize and is aimed at an initiated as well as a neophyte readership, curious to discover a new world.

Let yourself be guided by the beauty of the pieces displayed and the knowledge contained within these texts, according to your own interests and desires.

Above all, we hope this reading will be a pleasurable experience.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Sanskrit terms are spelled according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST).
Tibetan terms are written phonetically, with Wylie transliteration when they first occur. Unless otherwise specified, the words in parentheses correspond to the Tibetan transliteration.

Note on pronunciation

Most of the letters used may be pronounced according to their common English values.
The exceptions to this rule are as follows:
ā, ī, ō, and ū are long vowels
u and ū are pronounced [*oo*] as in *cool*
e is pronounced [*é*] as in *résumé*
ü is pronounced [*u*] as in the French *du*
ö is pronounced [*eu*] as in the French *feu*
c and ch are pronounced [*ch*] as in *check*
ṛ is pronounced [*rí*] with a rolled r
ṣ and ś are pronounced [*sh*] as in *sheriff*
The characters ḍ ḥ ṃ ṁ ṇ ṅ and ṭ are pronounced approximately as they are in English

CONTENTS

A JOURNEY, A LIFE, A WORK OF ART

What is a museum dedicated to Himalayan art and Tibetan Buddhism doing in Gruyères? It's undeniable that its geographical location, as much as the walls housing these sacred works of art, are quite astonishing. Some explanation may be found in the likeness of the Fribourg Alps to the Himalayas, in a collector falling in love with both Tibetan sacred objects and the chapel that now enshrines them, in the bringing together of Christian and Buddhist spiritualities in a single space. Is it not surprising to find the crane, the bird symbolizing the Gruyère, in a poem by the sixth Dalai Lama?

"White crane,
lend me your wings..."

Tsangyang Gyatso, sixth Dalai Lama

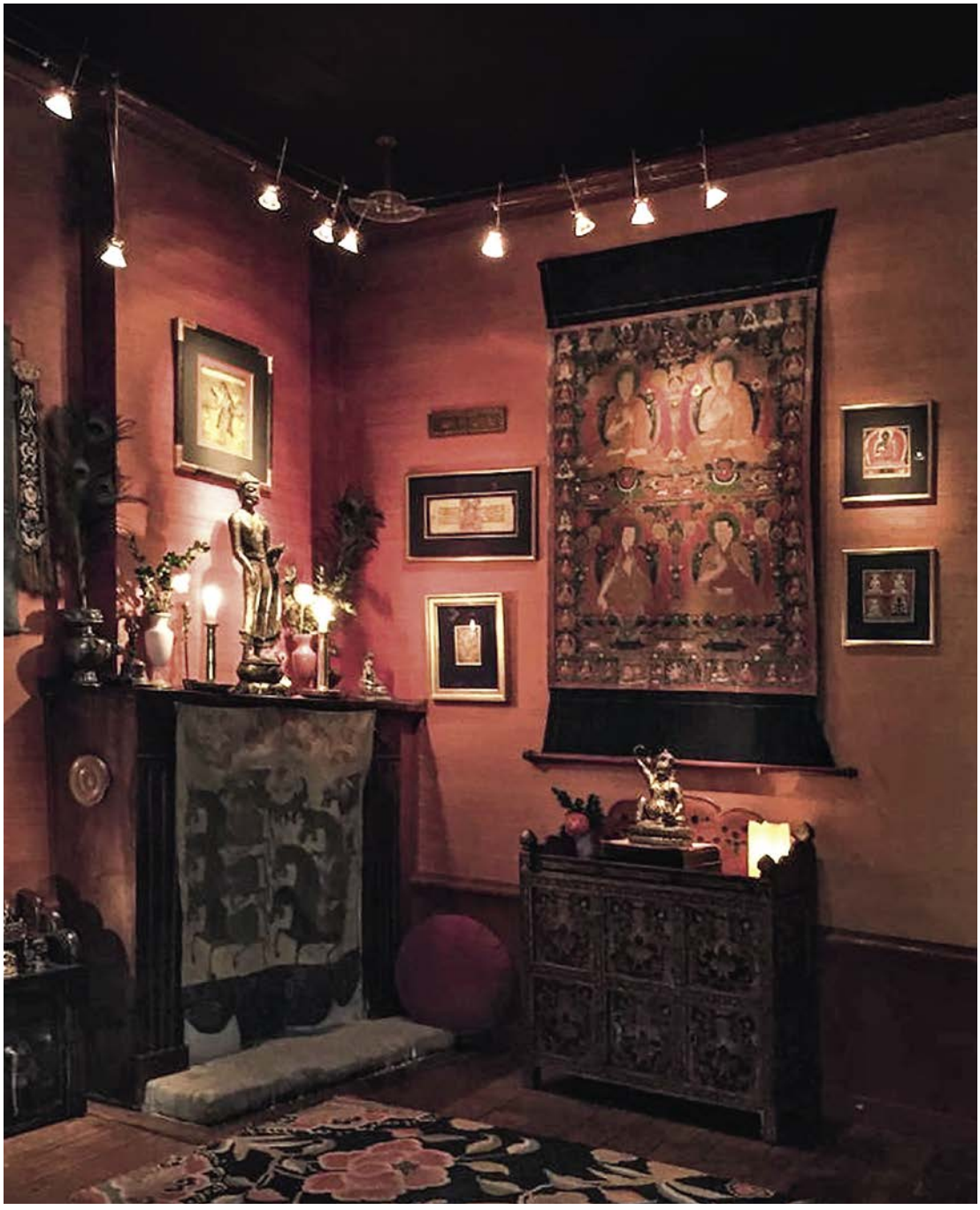
Facing page
Tibetan carpet with a crane.
Above
The symbol of Gruyères.

"There is no such thing as chance, there are only encounters," wrote Paul Éluard. Alain Bordier explains his strong carnal and spiritual connection with the museum:

"My museum is my temple. Gruyères is a sacred and very powerful place. The glaciers did not succeed in destroying the hill. The rock is hard, as hard as the vajra, the lightning and diamond symbol of Tibetan Buddhism. My collection could not have found a place anywhere else than this chapel. If I hadn't found it, the museum would never have come into being. I would have kept all these objects in my bedroom, in Sierne: a bed, on the floor, with all the statues gathered around it. I was the creator of a new universe, another world. It was my den, the room in which my father died."

One thing is certain: Alain Bordier did not want to set up his museum in a big city like Paris or Geneva. Chance as well as the proximity to nature and the mountains played a key role in his choice. Sacred objects are not to be exhibited anywhere, especially if they are ancient. Because they possess a singular energy and vibration that yearns to manifest itself, urban chaos does not suit them. It takes spiritual breadth, physical grandeur, and, at the same time, a quiet and gentle intimacy for their distinctive aura to radiate. Anonymity and a lack of human contact gradually whittle away at their "soul." What better place than a chapel, still imbued with the sacred, to bring the exhibits and the visitors together, fostering an exchange beneficial to both parties?

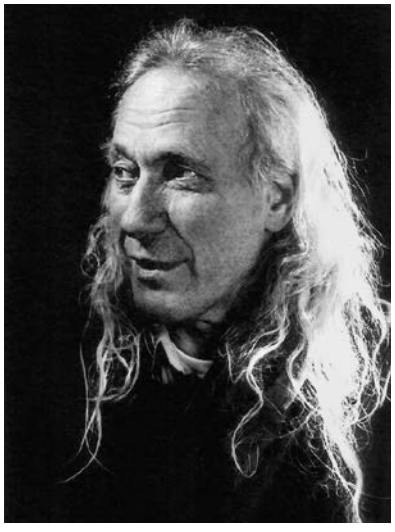
Above: Alain Bordier's living room and bedroom in his house in Sierne, Switzerland.



Alain Bordier's bedroom in his house in Sierne.

Speaking with villagers in Rajasthan, India.

Alain Bordier and his wife Françoise in Varanasi, India.



Benny Rüstenburg, Alain Bordier's first art dealer and adviser.

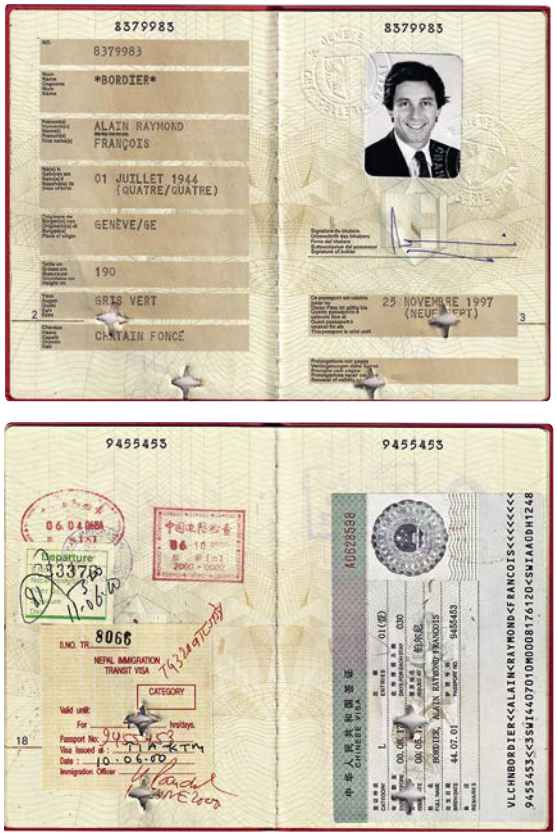
From Sierne to Gruyères via India and Tibet, the path was long and sometimes tortuous for the Genevan traveler, who never ceased to follow the twists and turns of his passion. *Itinerary of a Spoiled Child*? *Confession of a Child of the Century*? *Journey to the End of the Night*? *Tintin in Tibet*? Which title best summarizes Alain Bordier's journey from the foothills of the Himalayas to the creation of his foundation and the opening of the Tibet Museum? A journey, a life, a work? Perhaps.

DISCOVERING INDIA, THE JOURNEY OUTWARD

Alain Bordier was born on July 1, 1944 in Geneva, the son of a real estate developer father and a golf champion mother. His childhood was spent in the family hamlet of Sierne, near Geneva, a few meters from the French-Swiss border. His Reformed ancestors, forced into exile in 1535 fleeing religious wars, passed on their taste for beauty, travels, and collections of all kinds. Between working in a bank in London, going on family vacations in the South of France, and taking over the family business, Alain Bordier is part of what came to be known as the jeunesse dorée. This did not prevent him from working hard, getting married, having children, and taking on many responsibilities from an early age. His fundamental ambition was for his life to have true meaning. He discovered the pleasure of travel only later in life—he was not lacking in activities or adventure, but took the opportunity to join his friend Jean-Paul Dentan, an importer of Indian fabrics, on a tour of his suppliers in India, curious to discover the wonders that the Flower Power generation raved so much about. He discovered just about everything under the sun.

After the shock of this first trip, like so many others before him, Alain Bordier was fascinated to discover how India combines a spirituality that pervades everything, including art, with a Western way of life, resulting in so much opulence and wonder. He crisscrossed the Indian subcontinent, mostly accompanied by his wife, Françoise. These were his first expeditions outside Europe, his first contacts with a civilization and religion that, to this day, have pushed him to his limits. Rather than rejecting it, he kept coming back for more. The Bordiers made ten trips to India, each stay lasting over a month. They travelled through the immense country by taxi, declining to visit the few Buddhist temples on their way. From the shabby hotels to the beaches of Goa, through the major tourist destinations, Alain Bordier first discovered Hinduism—Śiva, the Saivite rituals and their close connection with nature as a whole made a lasting impression. The dancing god strikes and destroys in order to rebuild better. As he learned about these exotic divinities, Alain became infatuated with their artistic representations. He bought everything and anything: objects from antique shops in Delhi or Rajasthan, Gujarat fabrics from beach resorts, or silver necklaces sold by the pound on local markets.

Yamāntaka, first statue in Alain Bordier's collection.



Alain Bordier's passport.

One day, while buying fabric from a merchant, the latter gave him a small 1 - to 1 ½ -inch-tall statue of the Buddha, saying: "I'm giving it to you, I don't know why, but you will see, it will change your life." This Buddha is still sitting on his altar at home. Carrying it with him, he first arrived in Kashmir at Srinagar, then to Ladakh through the high passes. There he discovered Himalayan and Tibetan art, for which he developed a passion that has stayed with him, a passion ignited by the temple of Alchi and the visit of monasteries where all the styles intermingle: Kashmir, India, Persia, etc.

On his return, he attended an auction at Koller's in Geneva, where he had already acquired some Indian pieces, without ever thinking that one day he would be interested in Tibetan art.

This is how it all began. From Geneva, Alain goes to Zurich to meet art dealers. Firstly, Mr. Landolt, a Geneva-based dealer who lived in Nepal and introduced him to Benny Rüstenburg, another major art dealer. The latter arrived in Geneva with a single statue: Yamāntaka. Alain Bordier bought it, and it became the first piece in his collection. Thanks to Benny, he had direct access to the best objects. The Dutch dealer opened his eyes, awakening him to their beauty. Alain Bordier bought a dozen statues from him, almost expending his financial reserves in the process.

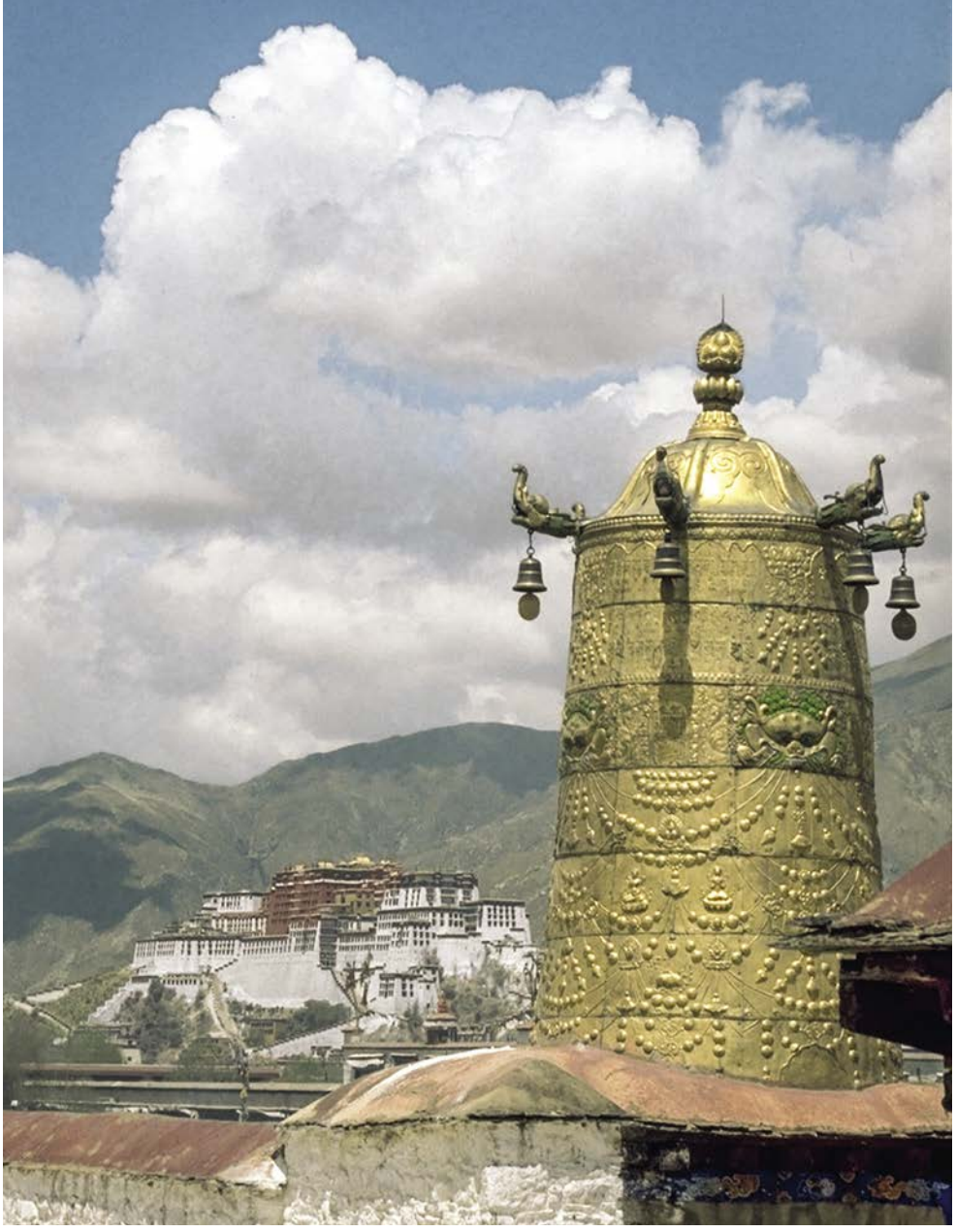
In 1987, Ulrich von Schroeder, another Tibetan art collector and specialist whom he had first met at Koller's and then in London, came to Geneva and into Alain's life. This was the beginning of his physical and spiritual journey to the high plateaus of the Himalayas. Without intending to, through chance and encounters, Alain Bordier followed the geographical path of Vajrayāna Buddhism: starting in India, he found a home in Tibet.

TIBET, THE MYSTICAL JOURNEY

It was in the land of eternal snow that Alain Bordier found the magic of the ancient civilizations present all over the world in different forms. He discovered a thousand-year-old culture that he considers to be one of the last remaining links in the chain of ancient traditions (Egyptians, Incas, etc.) that have disappeared everywhere else.

His consuming passion is reflected in his choice to collect beautiful Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist artistic objects. Carefully avoiding indiscriminate accumulation, he is conscious of having sublime objects at his fingertips. Due to its isolation from the world, he soon discovered high-altitude Tibet's peculiar character and the propensity of its inhabitants to develop unique and innovative ways of thinking.

However, this mysterious, fascinating land remained physically inaccessible for many years. The country had been forbidden to foreigners since the 1950s and only opened to tourists for the first time in 1980. That same year, Ulrich von Schroeder was one of the very first to enter Tibet with a specific goal in mind. Three years earlier, in Paris, he visited *Dieux et démons de l'Himalaya*, the first major exhibition on Himalayan and Tibetan art in the West. His verdict was clear: knowledge on the subject was far from complete. He then



Potala palace seen from the rooftop terrace of the Jokhang, Lhasa.

decided to play his own part by listing and describing the Tibetan statues belonging to collectors from around the world. The result of this work was published in 1981, under the name *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes*. He then resolved to travel to Tibet to photograph and categorize the remaining works of art in temples and monasteries. He waited patiently for the country to open, then traveled there four times, alone. It was a complicated task, a living hell on both administrative and technical levels. He needed help. Having forged a bond of friendship and trust with Alain Bordier over the years, and quite discouraged by the Tibetan situation, in 1993 Ulrich von Schroeder asked him to accompany him to Tibet. Alain, listening only to his heart and his passion for Himalayan art, quite unaware of what awaited him, agreed despite a very busy schedule. He would not regret it… well, not all the time.

ALAIN'S ADVENTURES IN TIBET

Alain made no less than seven trips to Tibet between 1993 and 2000. He lived a waking dream, visiting temples and touching unique statues of a rare beauty. He also discovered a tough and magnificent nature, a resilient and welcoming people, a simple and essential way of life. In a fax sent to his relatives, he writes:

"A big hello from a world of strangeness and discovery. Here, life is extremely difficult, but Tibetans are strong and resilient despite their great suffering. Invasions and decadence have made them lose part of their knowledge, so that hidden in the depths of the monasteries, fabulous treasures slumber in the dust. Our work is extraordinary, but exhausting. We stumble upon one discovery after another, in small or large monasteries like the Potala or the Jokhang, with the help of the monks… Here, body and mind meet their limits. It is first necessary to find balance through speech and breath, and then to train one's patience because here you *make your own* time *with your mind. You must try to abide in mental calmness for the good of the body. It's difficult! We are always someone's hostage, where is freedom to be found?"*

A PATH OF DISCOVERY

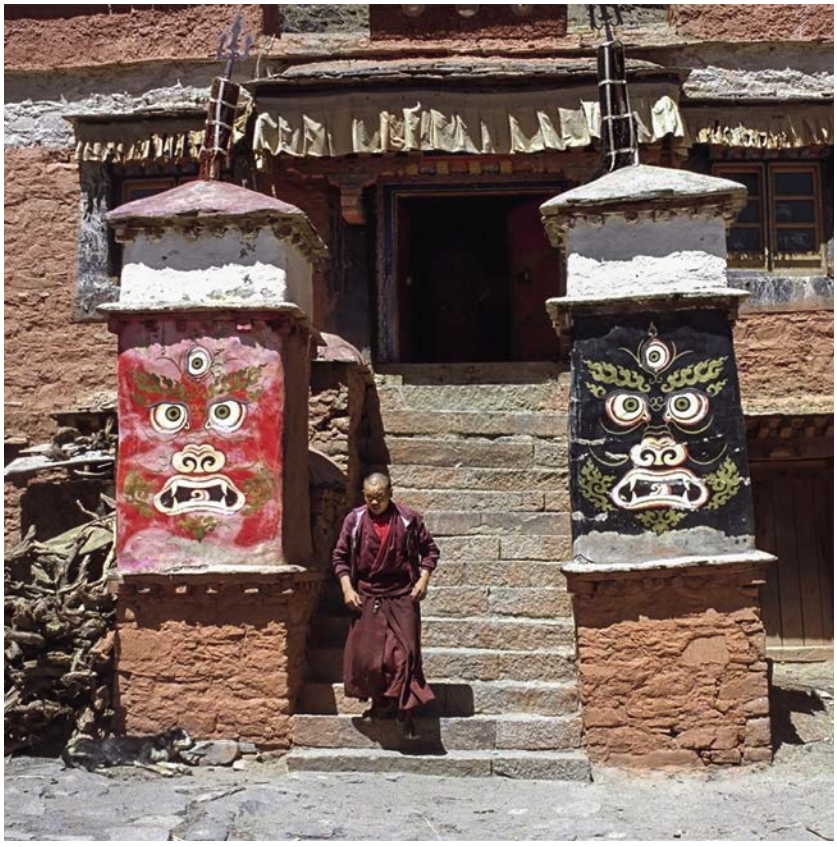
From the first trip in October 1993, Lhasa was already an ordeal. Alain Bordier recalls:

"I don't know what to expect. Everything is improvised. We landed this morning. The wind was blowing hard and moving mountains of sand. The plane had a hard time landing. We arrived at the airport with great difficulty. We had a long wait to get our boxes, full of equipment and gifts. You have to know that here, if you want to establish good relations, you are expected to offer presents: books, cognac, cameras, stickers, pens, paper, etc. are all part of the exchange. When we visit temples, it is well seen to bring something. In the monasteries, we distribute stickers to help label objects, and glasses to monks who can't see. Alcohol is more for the officials. At the airport, people were fighting over customers. It is hard. The army is everywhere. What a shock. Cultural, emotional. Buildings are coming out of the ground and buildings from the 1960s are being destroyed. It is a Dantean vision of an idealized world."

Alain Bordier admires engraved stones in Nartang.

The waiting was particularly unbearable. Even if the two explorers were free to move as they wished, it was practically impossible to get the official authorizations to photograph inside the temples and monasteries. Access was sometimes facilitated by a few benevolent monks, aware that this was the best way to safeguard their cultural and religious heritage.

Pempa Tsering, the precious guide without whom nothing would have been possible.



Two Mahākāla protectors guarding the entrance of Taklung monastery.

Alain Bordier and Ulrich von Schroeder decided to move away from the capital. They planned to stop in all the big and small monasteries along their way: Mindröling, Taklung, Reting, Drigung, Shalu, Ngor, Gyantse, Tashilhunpo, Nartang, Dratang, Samye, Sakya, etc. At the end of their stay, they realized, however, that of the twenty-three temples they visited, only the largest still contained statues.

They first traveled north-east, with great difficulty, sometimes facing immense disappointment when they only discovered ruins. On the way, Alain Bordier wrote:

"Heading to Taklung monastery. We ate dust all day. Outside the big cities, there are no paved roads. The cars don't even have suspension. We were stopped by the police for several hours when finally, our guide Pempa who proved indispensable on more than one occasion, managed to convince them to let us go. He certainly had to slip them some money. The Tibetans have a solution to everything. The monastery of Taklung, which is completely destroyed, is being rebuilt. The monks are making slow progress, but the kitchen is already operational. A fine example of resilience and pragmatism."

Some monasteries which were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution had been partially rebuilt. That is the case with Reting, where only part of the temple and some chapels were rebuilt by the hundred or so monks who live there. A little further on, Alain and Ulrich discovered the monastery of Drigung, also partially rebuilt, a very unusual place located on a steep crest. Some two hundred monks lived in semi-retreat in small hermitages higher up the mountain. When Alain and Ulrich visited, it was harvest time: in the plains, the sound of yak bells mingled with peasants' conversations, echoing down into the valleys.

Returning to Lhasa for a few days, they found the contrast striking and difficult to bear, especially since their request to access the Potala was denied once again. They quickly left the capital for the south, but before doing so, stopped at Sera, an important monastery that was still intact.

"We were greeted by a Chinese official who asked to see the permits," Alain Bordier recalls. "Even after explaining the situation, he didn't want to hear anything. Finally, the Rinpoche in charge of the monastery arrived. We literally prostrated ourselves at his feet and offered him gifts, as is customary. We were ready to give up when, very discreetly, a frail, ageless monk joined us and whispered that we should come back a little later. We did so, sneaking in with the last visitors, just before the doors closed. We remained hidden behind a pillar until around 7 p.m., waiting until it was dark and everyone had left. The old monk came to get us. He was supposed to help us remove the mountains of cloth under which the statues that we absolutely wanted to photograph were buried.

The eight bodhisattvas photographed by Ulrich von Schroeder at Sera monastery.

Representing the Body, Speech, and Mind

For Buddhism, each individual has three means or "doors" to interact with the outside world: the body, speech, and mind. This is also true for enlightened beings, with each means symbolized by a specific type of medium. The body of the Buddha is materialized by all types of representations, whether carved, painted, engraved, or otherwise; speech is symbolized through textual volumes; and the mind is represented by a reliquary or *stūpa*.

To represent the Buddha, noble materials are favored. Gold, silver, copper alloys, precious woods, gems, etc. show respect and are an opportunity for the patron to accumulate merit. The production of sacred images also obeys strict iconographic and iconometric rules recorded in treatises and transmitted within artist workshops.

BUDDHA ŚĀKYAMUNI (ABP 014)

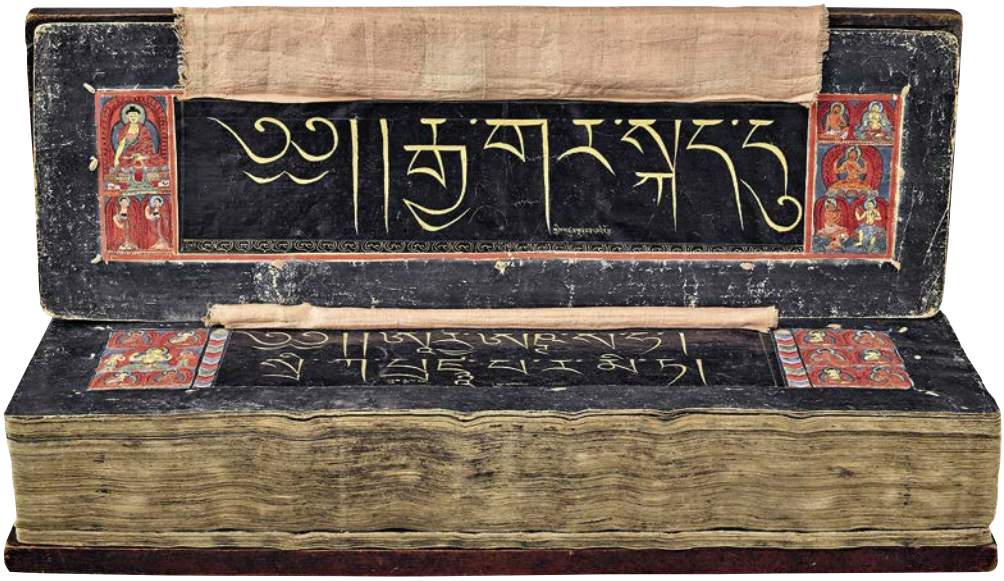
Tibet, fifteenth century
Pigment on cloth
8 ¾ × 7 ½ in. (22 × 19 cm)

This painting represents the Buddha in the posture of the victory over Māra. Seated on a lotus and precious throne supported by lions, his left hand holds the alms bowl and he is surrounded by two of his close disciples. On either side, two pilasters spring from vases and are surmounted by parrots, the top of the throne being composed of very elaborate plant scrollwork. The color palette, the dark floral background, and the architecture of the throne show a very strong Nepalese influence.

BUDDHA ŚĀKYAMUNI (ABS 116)

Tibet, thirteenth century
Brass with copper inlay
4 ¼ × 3 × 2 in. (10.5 × 7.8 × 4.9 cm)

Seated cross-legged in the diamond posture, the Buddha is represented with both hands in the gesture of contemplation, bearing his particular physical characteristics including no ornaments, curly hair, cranial protuberance, and distended earlobes. In this example, the robe is represented without folds except for its extremities on the shoulder and between the feet, where the border, delicately chiseled and lined with small beads, is inlaid with copper, as are the nails and lips. While most depictions of the Buddha represent the more famous episodes of his life, such as the victory over Māra or the teachings, this particular posture is relatively rare.



Traditional Tibetan books are composed of elongated sheets of paper, usually unbound and kept together between two boards; a format inspired by Indian palm leaf manuscripts. Some early copies are bound by a string passed through two holes in each leaf. From the fifteenth century onward, the development of xylographic printing allowed for printed volumes.

AṢṬASĀHASRIKĀ PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ (ABM 037)

Tibet, eighteenth century
Engraved wood, gold and silver ink on dyed paper
8 ½ × 25 ½ × 5 ½ in. (21.5 × 64.5 × 14 cm)

This large, richly decorated and illuminated manuscript testifies to the care taken in copying the sacred books, a source of merit for the patron. The letters are written in gold and silver ink on sheets of indigo-dyed paper. This is a copy of the Prajñāpāramitā, "the perfection of wisdom," in its eight thousand stanza version. This *sūtra*, dealing with emptiness, is one of the most emblematic texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism. As is customary, the first pages include miniatures representing the Buddha, bodhisattvas and especially the personified Prajñāpāramitā. With its imposing size and rich decoration, this manuscript celebrates both the skill of the artist and the importance of the teaching.

The *stūpa*—*chörten* (*mchod rten*) in Tibetan—are receptacles most often containing the relics of great masters. Originally, these funerary monuments preserving the Buddha's relics were built to commemorate the major events of his life at the important places he visited: his birth in Lumbinī, his victory over Māra in Bodhgayā, his first teaching in Sārnāth, and his *mahāparinirvāṇa* in Kuśinagar. They were the object of veneration and pilgrimage. According to tradition, there are eight types of differently shaped *stūpa*, each associated with a particular event. In Tibet, *stūpa* all share a similar structure with symbolism associated with the elements: a stepped square base for earth, a cylindrical "vase" for water, a conical spire for fire, a parasol for air, and at the top the sun and moon representing space and wisdom.

MAHĀPARINIRVĀṆA STŪPA (ABR 002)

Central Tibet, 1150–1350
Brass inset with turquoise and coral
10 ½ × 5 ½ × 5 ½ in. (26.8 × 13.8 × 13.8 cm)

This is a typical example of "Kadampa *stūpa*"—named after the Tibetan school founded by the Indian master Atiśa. Unlike the usual models, the round base is formed by a lotus rather than a square pedestal. The bell-shaped vase is topped by a balustrade inlaid with semi-precious stones. Above it, discs of decreasing diameter are stacked to form a cone, topped by a soberly suggested parasol. The symbols of the sun and moon are not represented at the top, bearing instead an imposing lotus bud. The circular shape of the two-lined "vase" shows that this *stūpa* commemorates the Buddha's *mahāparinirvāṇa* at Kuśinagar. Solid and squat in its design, the proportions and care taken in the finishing give this piece a particular sense of balance and harmony.

STŪPA OF UṢṆĪṢAVIJAYĀ (ABR 095)

Tibet, nineteenth century
Silver inset with turquoise and coral
15 ½ × 10 ¼ × 10 ¼ in. (39.5 × 26 × 26 cm)

This other example of a *stūpa*, also called a *caitya*, is the residence of the longevity deity Uṣṇīṣavijayā. Although it does not commemorate any of the eight events of the Buddha's life, the structure includes all the usual parts and proportions of a Tibetan *stūpa*: the stepped square base surmounted by three circular steps, the "vase," a reduced balustrade, the stack of discs, parasol, and topped by the moon, sun, and a jewel. The three-lobed halo opening in the "vase" houses a miniature representation of the goddess. The rest of the structure is richly decorated with inset stones and various ornaments (garlands, floral motifs) spread over the base and the vase. Compared to the previous example, the base and dimensions of the upper section radically change the proportions, slimming and lengthening the *stūpa* silhouette.

The Jetsün, lying in bed sick, surrounded by his disciples Seben Repa and Drigom.

MIRRORING THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

It was almost harvest time, though not everywhere yet. But in Kyangatsa, in the grassy Tsalung valley, the weather was good. The mild southern winds rising from neighboring Nepal and passing over to this side of the mountains were warming up the whole area. Barley was ripe and the yaks would soon be turning on the threshing grounds to break the barley ears. That is when Milarepa was born. Milarepa, the Jetsün, the holy and venerable one, the one who was to become famous, whom the whole world would know as the king of yogis. His intense, tormented life would strike a chord. He was the one who, in a single life and a single body, would attain Enlightenment, after playing so many different parts—a pampered child, an abused orphan, a great magician, a criminal, a devoted disciple—to finally become an intrepid hermit. In the early eleventh century, his existence would anchor Buddhism in these highlands, providing people with a genuine hero to admire.

Surely his story had to be told, and many tried to find the right words to bring it to life. How could one resist the urge to say that the Buddha was also Tibetan, that he looked like a long black-haired yogi dressed in a simple cotton sheet, and that his spiritual realization was unmatched? Everyone had a version of their own, and the story was passed down through different cultures and over the centuries until this day.

Little by little, as the pages go by, we shall understand what that story seeks to tell us, what it awakens within us. We will listen as it whispers and elaborates its many dreams. The picture will voluntarily be incomplete, though, and we shall only grasp snatches of it, like we do with the illuminations that are spread throughout the manuscript or with a shape silhouetted behind a veil. How could everything be said when it comes to Milarepa? And could a single story be the right one, the real one? What is true and what is false when it comes to telling the lives of saints, be they from here or from Tibet? Where would the story begin if not in our minds, when a character is sketched out and the landscapes around him slowly acquire a few tinges of color?

Can you make out the mountains extending as far as the eye can see, the endless plateaus? Can you see the black dots scattered on the plain, reminding us that yaks are grazing on the short grass under the scorching summer sun and that, come winter, they will scrape the snow with their hooves to find what they need to survive? Can you see the monks dressed in red and the elegant women, hair highlighted with turquoise, who sing like swallows to give rhythm to their work in the fields? Can you see the yogis, living in caves lost in the mountains, watching as snow leopards play in the distance? If these images spontaneously arise and the pure air of the highlands bathed in a blinding light makes you squint, then you are not far from the story of Mila the yogi and his master Marpa.

A story which, under the pen of successive biographers, was inspired by the great stages of the Buddha's life: this birth,

training and trials, maturity and Enlightenment, teachings, and finally, death. These echoes seem chosen to make us understand that both the Buddha and Milarepa had to go through stages and trials to reach Enlightenment. Like us, they had to open their eyes, both to the world around them and to themselves, to radically change their trajectory and become Enlightened. While the Buddha had to leave his palace and royal status to seek liberation, Milarepa had to confront the bitterness of the human condition to finally decide to turn his back on it. Each in his own way had come to realize that none can escape the clutches of birth, old age, disease, and death. For them both, there could be no other answer than a total and unconditional liberation from the mad cycle of existence, which had become so meaningless.

The Buddha left everything behind and went to meditate near the Narañjana river, determined to put an end to the world's endlessly repeating insanity—the harrowing *saṃsāra*—at whatever cost. As for Milarepa, after becoming a criminal to avenge his mother and sister of the evil that his uncle and aunt had done to all three of them, for which he felt immense regret, he committed himself to his master Marpa and accepted the austere path of purification he proposed. In the end, they both freed themselves once and for all, putting an end to the uninterrupted cycle of births and deaths.

Between the stories of Siddhārtha the Buddha and Milarepa the king of yogis, one thousand five hundred years had passed, and with them centuries of time, cultures, and major historical events. But each had become a Buddha, an Enlightened being, a powerful reminder of the true meaning of human existence.

The story of Milarepa, which echoes with more or less distant analogies that of the Buddha, was not going to come to an end on the Himalayan and Tibetan highlands. Centuries later, in our twenty-first century, it would still be alive and would continue to inspire and guide us. Perhaps it is simply because we are men and women: the quest for the absolute is inscribed within us.

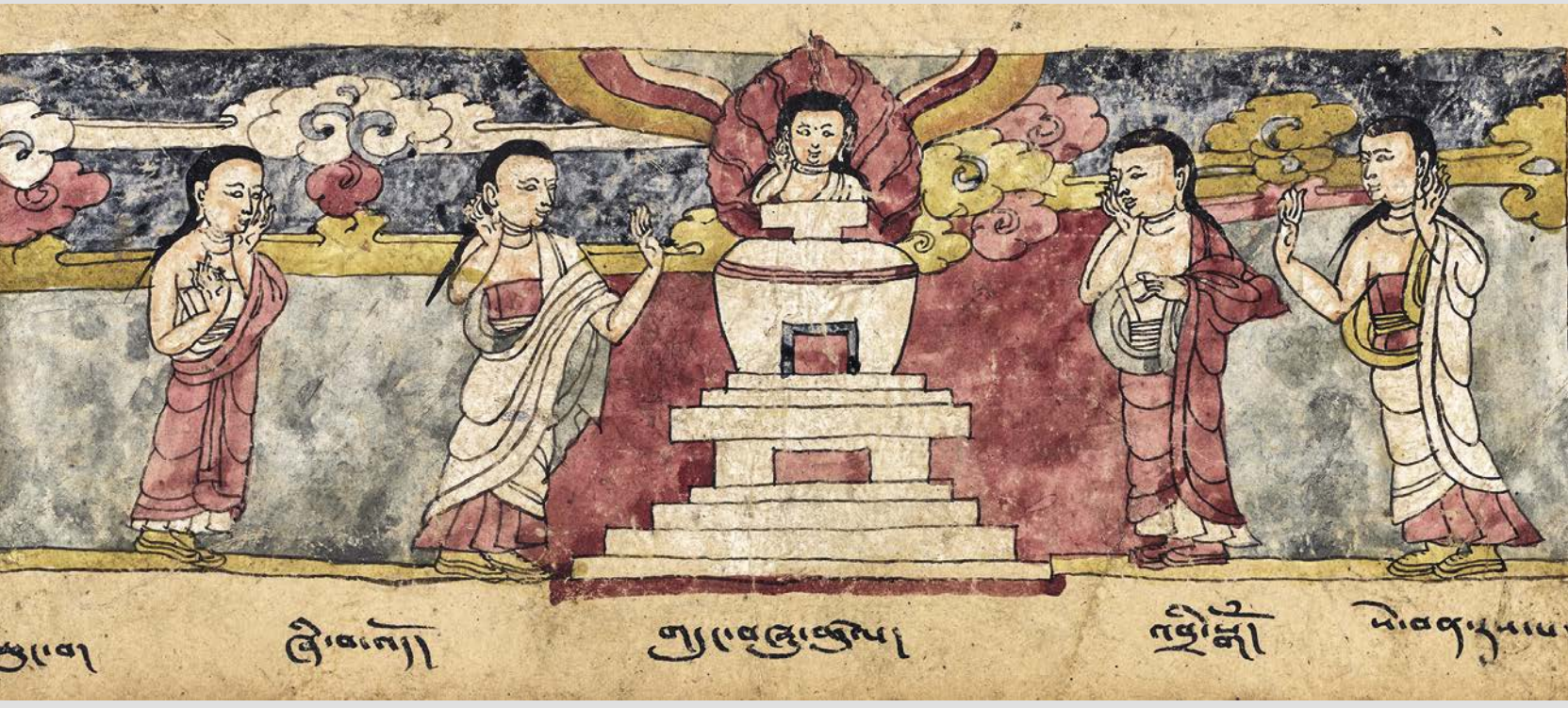
Illness and death

"But why did he drink the yogurt laced with poison?" Drigom Repa, one of Milarepa's disciples, could not believe it. His mind was filled with shock and sadness, and no matter how much he thought about it, he could not understand. All those surrounding Jetsün Milarepa were in the same state. "Why had he agreed to drink the yogurt offered by this ill-intentioned Bönpo? Surely, his realization was immense, but why take such a risk? The Buddha in his time had also accepted the food of the blacksmith who was going to end his life, but why should history repeat itself?" No longer able to resist the urge to ask these burning questions, Drigom Repa addressed the already quite ill Jetsün.

"It had to be done," Milarepa answered. "It was the only way to free this man." Milarepa explained that the Bönpo had mixed poison with yogurt and that a leper had handed him the drink.

One of the sad and troubled disciples, Seben Repa, asked what should be done after the Jetsün's death. What rites should they perform, how should they honor his memory, and what funeral building should they erect in his honor? With a song he answered them:

The Jetsün, passing in *parinirvāṇa*.



Milarepa appears above his funeral pyre, among his disciples Rechungpa, Shiwa Ö, Drigom, and Seben Repa.

"Lord Marpa of Lhodrak, out of kindness, whatever you had to do, you did. And I, Milarepa, by my zeal, have done what had to be done. Without relying on a lineage master, what is the point of asking him for empowerments? Without permeating mind with meaning, what is the point of holding the tantra? Without abandoning ordinary acts, what is the point of meditating on liberating instructions? Without attuning one's conduct to the Dharma, what good are rituals for? Without sticking to good words, what is the point of verse compositions? Without appeasing partiality, attachment, and aversion, what good are offerings for? Without truly abandoning one's own interest, why be generous? Without recognizing all beings as one's parents, why hold on to one's home? Without bringing forth pure sight in one's mind, what is the use of erecting *stūpa*? Without practicing during the four daily sessions, what is the point of making *tsatsa*? Without praying from the bottom of one's heart, what is the point of celebrating annual tributes? Without receiving the instructions in one's ears, why have celebrations in honor of the deceased? Without cultivating faith while alive, what is the point of observing the wishes of the dead? Without a deep weariness for ordinary things, what is the point of wanting to perfectly give up everything? If you do not feel compassion within yourself, what good are gentle words of love? Without renouncing passionate desires, what good is it to want to serve the master? Without holding on to words of truth, what good is it to be a master and a disciple? Rather than acting without benefit, stay still without harm. For a yogi, to act ceaselessly and be constantly busy is a cause of confusion."

A few days followed, then the Jetsün announced his imminent death. On the fifteenth day of the first month of the Tibetan year of the male hare, at sunrise, the Jetsün asked not to be approached for seven days and entered the state of final meditative absorption. On the sixth day, they saw the body shrink and a very clear glow emanate from it. With certainty they knew that their master had settled into the absolute reality of consciousness and was now beyond suffering. Some then saw a wrathful deity, others a peaceful deity. Some saw water, fire, a swirling wind, a *stūpa*, a vajra, a bell, gold, and a vase. On the seventh day, the glow diminished and the story of Jetsün Milarepa, the king of yogis, began.

Milarepa surrounded by the five sisters of long life under their glorious aspects, each one riding her own mount.

aware of this. So much so that, even when it comes to visible beings, it is so easy to ignore them by planting a flag on their land, then claiming to be its rightful owners!

This episode is profoundly thought-provoking, because if anything is to be tamed it is not others, but ourselves. And if the compassion that rises within does not allow us to face our fears, then it does not make much sense.

Tsering Che Nga, the five sisters of long life

On the border of Tibet and Nepal, in the beautiful grassy valley of Chubar, Milarepa dwelt in deepest meditation. This was the land of Tseringma and her sisters, the five who would one day become the yogi's powerful protectors. But at the time, in that peaceful and welcoming place, the pact between these powerful forces and Mila had not yet been sealed. It was a time of belligerent and inquisitive defiance, of subterfuge and spells, a way for them to make sure that the yogi deserved their respect and that he would be powerful enough to subdue them.

One day, taking advantage of the fact that he was unaware of all their tricks, they burst into his mind. In response, summoning Buddhas and protectors, Milarepa revealed their appearance and the identity of the horde of powerful and cruel spirits that followed them. The vision had the force of the raging elements, the sky bursting into flames and the earth collapsing. Keeping his composure, trusting in the help of his masters and the Buddhas, Milarepa chanted for them and gave them a face: "I see a girl, like a skeleton, carrying mountains in her lap. I see another, red dripping with blood, like a fox, sucking up the ocean. I see one, properly terrifying, like the king of death, playing cymbals with sun and moon. Another, like a laughing girl of ashes, I see her scattering the planets and the stars. And another, I see her as a smiling girl unfolding her song, a seductive goddess the eyes never tire of looking at."

The demons wanted to know who this yogi was. Certainly, his singing was deep, and his eyes perceived the spectacle of illusions, but could he face death, whose features they evoked, terrifying and solitary?

To answer them, the Jetsün sang: "This present body, it comes from attachment and from a mind identifying itself with its object. This bunch of aggregates is but a gathering of the four elements, and because it is born, it does not escape death. If you, demons and spirits, need it, I offer it to you for it is nothing but impermanent and irremediably changing. At this moment, I am able to give it to you and thus accomplish a great purpose."

The yogi's chant touched them. They recognized that his realization was great and their doubts were misplaced. If he could give his flesh, then he had understood the deeper meaning of things and ego was no more real to him than the illusion of a dream. In fact, they admired the strength of his love. Had arrogance driven him, they would have eaten him up, leaving his remains to the hungry pack that followed them. Nothing would have remained of the king of yogis, not even a bloodstain. Now they were surrendering to a force stronger than their powers: the infinite love they perceived within him.

"Stop doing evil," asked Milarepa. "Be my protectors and put your power at my service."

The five sisters bowed and bound themselves to his mind, ready to learn and reveal their secrets to him. They would be there from now on, in the words of the prayers and the power of the rituals, in the hearts of those who would call their names. Demons or goddesses, it would now be up to others to know how to tell them apart.

PEACEFUL AND WRATHFUL DEITIES: THE MANY FACES OF COMPASSION

IV

Settling and flourishing in Tibet, Vajrayāna Buddhism defines itself as an evolution of Mahāyāna. Its goals and ideals remain identical, those of a bodhisattva who strives to become a fully awakened Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings. This altruistic motivation, called "enlightened mind" or *bodhicitta*, is rooted in the following observation: we all are born, we all die, and are reborn within *saṃsāra*. Having experienced an infinite number of successive lives since beginningless time, we have ended up in contact with each and every sentient being, who has therefore potentially been our father or mother. At the time, they have shown love and affection, protected and fed us and it is natural to show them gratitude in return for their care. This thoughtful consideration for all beings is called *mahā karuṇā*, "great compassion," a quality which must be cultivated by the bodhisattva along with wisdom or *prajñā,* in order to reach Enlightenment.

Bodhicitta is omnipresent in practice. By motivating practitioners to accomplish positive deeds, it generates merit and virtue. To prevent these qualities from being diminished or tainted by selfish concern, every practice inevitably concludes with dedication to all beings, together with aspirational prayers so that all may reach Enlightenment. Only by being shared will merit and virtue grow endlessly.

Avalokiteśvara, the "Lord who gazes down at the world"

The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara embodies the compassion of all Buddhas. He enjoys unparalleled renown throughout the Mahāyāna Buddhist world and is evoked in an infinite number of forms, both male and female—the latter especially in the Far East. Avalokiteśvara is the manifestation of Buddha Amitābha in the royal form of the *saṃbhogakāya*, the body of perfect rapture, which is why there is most often a miniature representation of this Buddha in his hair. As mentioned previously, a special bond links the bodhisattva of compassion to Tibet and Tibetans. In addition to the founding myth of the ape and the demoness, the first emperor Songtsen Gampo was rapidly considered an emanation of Avalokiteśvara—to the point of sharing the physical characteristic of the Buddha Amitābha's head on top of his own, which he had to conceal under a turban. Later, the Karmapa and then the Dalai Lama lineages would also be considered as Avalokiteśvara emanations. Unsurprisingly, the palace built in Lhasa by the fifth Dalai Lama was named Potala, after Potalaka, the mythical mountain where the bodhisattva resides.

Avalokiteśvara strives tirelessly for the good of all beings. One of his manifestations is depicted as having eleven heads and a varying number of arms. According to legend, he descended into the world to save all beings from lower destinies and lead them to Amitābha's pure land. By the time he had managed it, *saṃsāra* was again filled with beings. Overcome by distress, he doubted the success of his endeavor, and his head exploded into several pieces. From each of them, Amitābha created a new head, gathered them onto the bodhisattva's body, and added his own to the top. Thus was created Ekādaśamukha, Avalokiteśvara's eleven-headed form.

◂ **SAHASRABHUJA EKĀDAŚAMUKHA LOKEŚVARA (ABP 004)**

Tibet, fourteenth century
Pigment on cloth
22 ¾ × 18 ¾ in. (58 × 47.5 cm)

The bodhisattva whose skin is "white as snowy peaks reflecting the morning sun" stands on a lotus, his legs girded with a series of elaborately folded colorful fabrics. Of his four main pairs of hands, the first makes a salutation before his heart, three hold various attributes, and hundreds of others surround him like a wheel. In the palm of each hand stretched out to assist other beings there is an eye, earning him the name "a thousand arms and a thousand eyes" (*phyag stong spyan stong*). His eleven heads are arranged in five rows, the highest being wrathful, with the head of Amitābha above. Of imposing proportion, Avalokiteśvara dominates the crowd of Buddhas, deities, and masters that surrounds him, as he dominates the world, extending a helping hand to all. A rare element, the modeling of the gilded jewels, gives them relief.

▸ **SAHASRABHUJA EKĀDAŚAMUKHA LOKEŚVARA (ABP 070)**

Tham Bahi, Nepal
August 29, 1504
Pigment on cloth
37 ¾ × 30 ¾ in. (96 × 78 cm)

This highly refined Nepalese *paubhā* is remarkable in many regards. In addition to great aesthetic qualities—of which the beauty of the fabric is but one example—a dedication at the bottom specifies when and where it was consecrated and the sponsor's name. It connects it to Tham Bahi, an ancient Kāthmāndu temple with a rich history linked to Tibet. The bodhisattva's entourage does not usually correspond to this form but to Amoghapāśa's, whose tiny representation appears below the main deity. Other forms of Avalokiteśvara acting as protectors against the eight forms of fear are also depicted around him in the halo. But the iconography of this piece is most surprising. Avalokiteśvara is recognizable in his thousand-armed form, but some details differ compared to the previous artwork. Fourteen pairs of his main hands are visible, some in unusual positions. This form, unknown to date in Tibet, is found only on the Silk Road and in the Far East, five to six centuries earlier. Finally, the side registers contain a series of unidentified scenes depicting many Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This astonishing work thus remains quite mysterious.

"For as long as space endures, and for as long as living beings remain, Until then may I too abide to dispel the misery of the world."

Śāntideva