

# A 15th Century Thangka of Bhaiṣajyaguru: Reflections on the Historical Significance of the Medicine Buddha Cycles in Murals Paintings of Western Tibet

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**Abstract:** The representation of the full maṇḍala of Bhaiṣajyaguru on a thangka including portraits of early Dge lugs pa hierarchs forms the basis of this research which investigates the emergence of the practice of the cult of Bhaiṣajyaguru in Western Tibet during the 14th century and its continued importance during the period of Dge lugs pa expansion in the Guge kingdom as of ca. 1430. By study of the 14th century representations in mural paintings in the Khojarnath monastery as well as the cave paintings of Par in comparison with the later mural representations at Tsaparang, the focus is the composition of the mural and portable representations of the liturgical cycles of the Buddha of Medicine and the aesthetic development in Western Tibet reflecting Newar influences as well as the Kashmiri aesthetic grammar. The elegant fusion of these two distinct aesthetic tendencies may be seen in the present maṇḍala of Bhaiṣajyaguru and in the c. 1470 -1480 murals of the Red Temple at Tsaparang.

**Key words:** Bhaiṣajyaguru, Medicine Buddha, Par, Khojarnath, Tsaparang

This thangka is a sumptuous portrait of the Buddha, represented here as the Medicine Buddha (Sanskrit Bhaiṣajyaguru, Tibetan Sman bla) surrounded by his entourage and Tibetan monks who venerated him (Figure 1).<sup>①</sup> For Tibetans, the elimination of suffering, both physical and mental, is one of the primary objectives of Buddhist teachings. To heal illness, it is not only physician's care and medication but also supplication to the Buddha, regarded as the supreme teacher, who plays the additional role of the "Master of Remedies." As corollary to the alleviation of suffering, the Buddha's teachings comprise the principle of the "three poisons" which lead to afflictive states of mind. These three concepts may be variously translated as: greed or attachment,

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① In the Sanskrit name, the full name is Bhaiṣajyaguru Vaiḍūryaprabha. Bhaiṣaj means "healing, curing" and Guru, means "teacher", *vaiḍūrya* is "lapis lazuli", and *prabha* is "radiance /aura". Thus the full name translates as "The Buddha of Healing (who is) the radiance of Lapis lazuli".



Figure 1 Thangka of Bhaiṣajyaguru, Western Tibet, mid-15th century, pigment and raised gold on cotton, 101.6 x 86.36 cm.

aggression or aversion and ignorance or delusion, symbolically represented by the pig, the snake and a fowl. In one of the favorite prayers dedicated to Bhaiṣajyaguru, he is invoked in this dual capacity as dispeller of disease and of the three poisons, thus by dedicating a thangka to the Medicine Buddha, it is hoped to ensure good health, longevity and peace of mind for the donor and for all sentient beings:

Glorious one of the buddha-field Lapis Light:  
I prostrate to Medicine Guru, King of all Physicians.  
Bhagavan with equal compassion for all,  
Whose name, when merely heard, dispels  
the suffering of lower realms,  
Dispeller of disease and the three poisons:  
I prostrate to Medicine Buddha Lapis Light.<sup>①</sup>

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<sup>①</sup> Excerpt from a prayer dedicated to Bhaiṣajyaguru by the Dge Lugs pa master, the First Panchen Lama (1570-1662), translated by David Molk , see page 9: <http://www.fpmt.org/images/stories/hope!/a4/booklet/medbudsutraa4bklt.pdf>

Vitali has summarized the development of the cult of sMan bla thus, " By the monumental evidence that can still be found locally in Stod (ie. Stod Mnga' ris) , mainly consisting of murals dating from the 15th century onwards, Sman bla (lha) was a deity especially popular in West Tibet as a result of the Dge lugs pa diffusion. " <sup>①</sup>While this is indeed valid for the Stod region, before discussion of this thangka which reflects the Dge lugs pa context, it is important to consider as well earlier representations of the Sman bla/lha and their entourage in mural paintings of Guge and Pu hrang which are probably to be attributed to ca. 14th century, prior to the Dge lugs pa emphasis on this cult. We will here evoke three series of such murals: the caves of Par, near Tholing studied by David Pritzker (2000), Huo Wei (2003) and Zhang Changhong (2010); the Khojarnath temple studied by Helmut and Heidi Neumann (2012) and the murals of the Zhag cave, again studied by Helmut and Heidi Neumann (2012) as well as Tsering Gyalbo (in press, "Guge kingdom period mural paintings in the newly discovered Zhag grotto, Mnga' ris, Western Tibet" ).

The wall paintings of the Par cave complex appear to have been painted in different phases as the cave long remained in use as a chapel. According to the analysis of David Pritzker, the wall of the murals of the Medicine Buddha has been attributed to the 13th century (Pritzker 2000: 132), and was probably made by Newari artists, in comparison with well known Nepalese thangkas. Vitali had indeed discovered records at Tholing which indicate the presence of Newari artists in the region during the 13th century.<sup>②</sup> The iconographic identifications are confirmed by inscriptions in Tibetan language. The full wall comprises three sections. At right, there are Prajñāpāramitā and Nagarāja as well as four of the eight Medicine Buddhas, at left there is a maṇḍala of Vairocana; at left there are Avalokiteśvara and Green Tara, as well as the other four of the eight Medicine Buddhas. (see Figures 2-3, photography by David Pritzker, 2012). All the Buddha are seated and enthroned, flanked by two standing Bodhisattva. In the lower register on the west wall, there are small portraits of the Gods of the ten Directions each riding on a different animal mount.



figure 2



figure 3

① R. Vitali, *The Kingdoms of Guge Pu.hrang*, Dharamsala, 1996: 140.

② R. Vitali, *Records of Tholing*, Dharamsala, 1999: 124-125.

In Khojarnath, Heidi and Helmut Neumann have studied a little known mural of the Bhaiṣajyaguru maṇḍala whose composition is arranged with the deities in horizontal and vertical rows, rather than the maṇḍala configuration of concentric circles within a square frame of a celestial palace with four gateways (see Figure 4, photograph by Helmut and Heidi Neumann).<sup>①</sup>



Figure4.

Moreover, this maṇḍala exhibits certain distinctive iconographic features to which we will return below in the detailed discussion of the 15th century Sman bla thanka.



Figure 5.

Lastly, there are murals of the eight Medicine Buddha in the Zhag cave, also known as Pang gra phug (see Figure 5, photograph by Helmut and Heidi Neumann). To summarize the Zhag cave, let us quote the remarks of Heidi and Helmut Neumann, "Like Khojar, where Prajnaparamita is in the centre of the Bhaiṣajyaguru maṇḍala, she also forms the centre of the group of the seven Medicine Buddhas and Śākyamuni... seated on a lotus throne supported by crouched lions in front of throne backs of the type well-known from 13th and 14th century thankas. White Vyālas support the throne back on the sides, Makaras and Hamsas surround the halo of the deity with their ornate tails. Hardly visible is the Kīrtimukha on the top of the halo. The corners above the throne backs have been used to picture monks in various mudrās, some hold a bowl in their left hand thus resembling Bhaiṣajyaguru." These people possibly represent religious persons important for the history of the monastery to which this cave temple once

<sup>①</sup> The maṇḍala arrangement in horizontal and vertical rows has been identified in the early ninth century murals of Yulin (maṇḍala of Vairocana and 8 Bodhisattvas) and subsequently in western Tibet in Vairocana cycles in the stupa at Tholing (early 11th century) as well as Tabo Dukhang as well as Dunkar.. (See discussion of ancient Vairocana maṇḍala configurations in A. Heller, "Eighth and ninth century rock carvings and temples in Eastern Tibet;" see Deborah Klimburg-Salter, *Tabo: a Lamp for the Kingdom* for the Dharmadhatu-vagisvara maṇḍala in Tabo, and Helmut Neumann, "The Cave of the Offering Goddesses" for this maṇḍala in Dunkar, also in horizontal/vertical configuration rather than circular composition.

belonged, for which a late 13th century date is proposed by H. and H. Neumann in comparison with the paintings of the Luri stupa in Mustang.<sup>①</sup> The Neumanns described specific aesthetic characteristics of the Buddhas of both Luri and Zhag murals thus, "the heart-shaped face, the elongated earlobes, the flowers in the hair above the ears, the spikes on the hair, and the vajra on top of the uṣṇīṣa. The depiction of the physiognomy is equally similar: the curved lines of the eyebrows, the half closed eyes with only the lower part of the pupil visible, the small mouth and even the three schematic lines of the neck...(which like the representations of the Bodhisattvas ) shows that the artists working at Pang gra phug were familiar with the South Tibetan painting style which showed strong Pala and Nepalese influences." In this respect, there is a departure from the strong impact of the Kashmiri aesthetic which dominated the Guge kingdom since the 11th century.

In the present thangka, Bhaiṣajyaguru is seated on a lotus pedestal throne supported by two lions, the emblem of the clan of the historic Buddha Śākyamuni. The upper section of the throne has two peacocks, emblematic of Amitabha, the Buddha of Longevity who resides in the Western Paradise, and the apex of the throne is graced by the head of a Garuda (*khyung*), a predatory bird who serves as protector of the Buddha and the Buddhist teachings in celestial space. The Medicine Buddha's gold bejewelled throne stands as an isolated architectural element inside the deep blue background with small white floral motifs, as if a midnight sky with countless minute stars. The dark green cushion enhances the brilliant tones of oranges and red of his monastic garments, which appear to be made from several pieces of Indian silks with gold floral motifs. His left hand holds the bowl of alms in his lap, filled with the leaves and stems of a medicinal plant (*arura*). The right hand is represented palm up, in the varada mudra, the gesture of generosity and boon-bestowing, simultaneously clasping a golden fruit of the same medicinal plant. The Medicine Buddha is flanked by two Bodhisattvas, at his right, Sūryagarbha, holding the red disk of the sun (*Surya*) above his right shoulder, and at his left, Candragarbha, holding the white crescent of the moon (*candra*) above his left shoulder.

The composition is organized in terms of hierarchy. In the uppermost horizontal register, there is the group of the Eight Buddhas of Medicine, which comprises the historic Buddha Śākyamuni and seven other Buddha. They are all enthroned inside trilobate arches, each Buddha is flanked by two Bodhisattva.<sup>②</sup> These Medicine Buddhas all wear a mantle over the shoulders

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① On Luri see the earlier publications by H. Neumann as well as the remarks by R. Vitali, *ibid* 1999:124, who initially determined the late 13th century chronological context of Luri while the research by Ian Alsop (2004) gave emphasis to the inscriptions of the monks' names in Luri, indicative of an initial Bka' brgyud pa lineage (see I. Alsop, "The Wall paintings of Mustang" in P. Pal, ed., *Nepal Old Images, New Insights*, Delhi, 2004: 128–139).

② As the Eight Buddhas of Medicine are each flanked by two Bodhisattva, the latter constitute the cohort of Sixteen Bodhisattva, which is an important group in Tibetan Buddhism, as there are four Bodhisattva surrounding each of the Buddha of the Four Directions in several maṇḍala cycles. This group of Sixteen Bodhisattva are part of the entourage of the maṇḍala of Bhaiṣajyaguru. See the "Sixteen Bodhisattva" analysis by M.-T. de Mallmann, *Introduction à l'iconographie du bouddhisme tantrique*, Paris, 1986:125, and "Maṇḍala and Maṇḍala Bodhisattva" in Thomas E. Donaldson, *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*, New Delhi, 2001: 126.

while Śākyamuni, second from the right, has only the simple monastic garment.<sup>①</sup> In the second and third rows, there are five Tibetan monks all wearing the tall yellow hat of the Dge lugs pa monastic order, interspersed with seven laymen wearing aristocratic garments and pointed



hats and turbans.<sup>②</sup> These men, whose appearance resembles the ancient Tibetan kings, are a group of sages who transmitted Buddhist teachings.<sup>③</sup> Two larger Dge lugs pa monks are seated directly beside the peacocks of the throne. Their prominent position is indicative of the identification, at right, of the founder of the Dge lugs pa order, Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) who, although lacking his characteristic sword and book attributes, may be recognized by his hands over his heart forming the dharmacakra mudra of teaching<sup>④</sup>, while the other monk is depicted with his right hand raised in the *vitarka mudra* of argumentation, the left hand in his lap, and he appears to have a Tibetan bell drillbu (emblem of wisdom) above his left shoulder. The identification of the second monk cannot be precisely determined but he is likely to be Nawang Dagma (Tib. Ngag dbang grags pa)<sup>⑤</sup>, a pupil of Tsongkhapa who was native of the Guge kingdom of western Tibet

① This compositional device of the trilobate archway which distinguishes the group of Eight Medicine Buddha and their flanking Bodhisattvas appears in a Western Tibetan mural of the Medicine Buddha maṇḍala (ca. 14th century) from Khojarnath, capital of the Pu.hrang kingdom of Western Tibet. See Helmut Neumann and Heidi Neumann "An Early Wall Painting of a Bhaiṣajyaguru Maṇḍala in Western Tibet." (see below, Figure 4, detail of this maṇḍala from Khojarnath)

The importance of the Medicine Buddha cycle in Western Tibet has been amply proven. See also, for example, David Pritzker, "The Treasures of Par and Khatse" and Helmut and Heidi Neumann, "Wall Paintings of Pang gra phug : Augusto Gansser's Cave."

② I am grateful to the Ven. Tsenshab Rinpoche, a Dge lugs pa master who teaches the rituals of Medicine Buddha (Zürich) for confirming that these men are to be identified as the "Knowledge-holders" (sanskrit: vidyadhara, Tibetan rig 'dzin), ancient sages who transmitted the teachings of Bhaiṣajyaguru and other Buddhist deities.

③ These sages appear in ca. 14th century mural paintings of the Medicine Buddha cycle at Khojarnath. See Figure 4 and see Plate 8 in Helmut Neumann and Heidi Neumann "An Early Wall Painting of a Bhaiṣajyaguru Maṇḍala in Western Tibet." It would seem that their inclusion in the entourage may be specific to early Western Tibetan representations because these teachers are not described in the Tibetan rituals of the Medicine Buddha which I have been able to consult, nor are they represented on other thangka I have been able to consult; They are not represented in Tucci's Western Tibetan thangka of the Medicine Buddha (Figure 6), now conserved in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, see discussion by P. Pal, *Art of Tibet*, plate P8, Healing Buddha and his Celestial Assembly, 1983: 142–143 and G. Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, vol. 2: 360–61. Previously attributed to the 15th century, in comparison with the Khojarnath murals and the present thangka, Tucci's thangka appears to be slightly later, ie. late 15th to early 16th century (see below).

④ See for example, Tsongkhapa with Madhyamaka and Yogācāra lineage of Teachers, Zimmerman family collection, ca. 1425, Central Tibet, 81.3 x 71.1 cm, illustrated as figure 151 in P. Pal, *Himalayas an Aesthetic Adventure*, Art Institute of Chicago, 2003: 230–31

For a detailed discussion of Tsongkhapa, see Robert Thurman, *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*, Dharamsala, 1981. Robert Thurman wrote all essays on Tsongkhapa in the exhibition catalogues *Wisdom and Compassion*, see Marilyn Rhie and Robert Thurman *Wisdom and Compassion* 1996 no. 210, second half 15th century portrait in Michael McCormick collection; no. 211 last quarter of 15th century portrait in Michael McCormick collection; 17th century portrait in Ronge Family Collection; *Wisdom and Compassion* 1999 no. 125, a 16th century portrait in Rubin Museum of Art, 2000.

and returned there shortly after Tsongkhapa's death spurring the rapid expansion of the Dge lugs pa school in this region under the aegis of the kings of Guge. Nawang Dagpa served as the royal chaplain to the kings of Guge, thus assuring the paramountcy of the Dge lugs pa in this period. Above Tsongkhapa and his pupil are two smaller Dge lugs pa monks performing hand and feet gestures characteristic of the Dge lugs pa style of philosophical debate.

At right in the fourth position is a small portrait of the Śaḍakṣarī ("6 syllables") Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, in the four-arm white aspect as protector of the mantra of 6 syllables: *Oṃ Māṇi Padme Hūṃ*, and facing him on the left is the last of the seven Tibetan laymen.

Next there are four monks, two on each side, followed by the Guardians of the four directions: at left, the white Dhritarashtra of the east and the green Virudhaka of the south, next to whom is seated a Gelugpa monk performing consecration rituals; at right, the red Virupakṣa of the west, and Vaiśrāvaṇa of the north next to whom is standing the wrathful protector Mahākāla in his aspect with 6 arms as protector of wisdom (Tibetan: *Ye shes mgon po*)<sup>⑤</sup>. In the following rows there are twelve seated male deities, all crowned, several of whom hold the mongoose as symbols of prosperity. These is the group called the twelve Yakṣha, they assist Vaiśravaṇa. The lowest registers have the Indian gods of the ten directions (four cardinal points, intermediary points, zenith and nadir):

(1) Eastern direction, Brahma, riding a goose. (2) Indra, white, riding an elephant. (3) Agni, riding a goat. (4) Southern direction, Yama, blue, should ride a buffalo, although the animal here more resembles a mule. (5) South-west, Rakṣa, riding a zombie. (6) West, Varuṇa, riding a white makara. (7) North-west, Vayu Deva, riding a deer. (8) North, Yakṣa, yellow, holding a mongoose, riding a horse. (9) The ninth figure should be the god of the North-east, Māheśvara, white, riding a buffalo, but there appears to be a substitution here as this god is black and riding a mule. (10) The tenth and last figure, however, is represented according to the requisite description, and it is the goddess of the West, Bhūdevī, yellow, holding a vase, riding a sow. This concludes the entourage of subsidiary figures.

In this thangka, the intense contrast of the deep blue silhouette of the Buddha with the pale halo emphasizes the almost iridescent blue body color. The spherical uṣṇīśa is terminated by a gold finial, the hair is rendered by short thin lines, so dense as to be luminous; the facial planes show nuanced shading, a graduated chromatic treatment which highlights certain areas of the forehead, the cheeks and chin, while a thin gold line delicately outlines the perfect features for the profile of the nose, the arch of the brows and the bow-shaped lips. The planes of the torso

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⑤ See Roberto Vitali, *Records of Tholing* (1999: 37–40), on the role of Ngag dbang grags pa at Tholing, as well as Vitali's recent volume on the Gelugpa school in Western Tibet, 15th–17th century.

① Mahākāla of Wisdom in his 6-armed aspect was one of Tsongkhapa's principal meditation deities, as indicated in his biography and by an early 15th century thangka (1434–1450) of this aspect of Mahākāla with Tsongkhapa and the Dge lugs pa lineage in the Essen Collection: G. Essen and T. Thingo, *Die Götter des Himalaya*, 1989, vol. 1: 132, now conserved in the Basel Ethnography Museum, Essen Collection.

have similar chromatic modeling. The spherical usnisha, the short lines of the hair, the widow's peak hairline, the almond shape eyes, bow-lips, and the chromatic modeling all reflect the Kashmiri aesthetic grammar which penetrated the Guge kingdom during the late 10th century, particularly evident in the few extant mural paintings of Tholing, the capital of Guge, and in many manuscript illuminations which were commissioned there, during the 11th to 12th century, now conserved in public and private collections (see figure 7. an illumination of a Buddha from a *Prajñāparamita* manuscript, discovered by Tucci 1935 in Tholing and now conserved in the Tucci Archives, IsIAO Roma, photo by the author).<sup>①</sup>



Figure 7



Figure 8

This Kashmiri aesthetic strongly marked certain artists of the Guge kingdom who perpetuated this style in the following centuries, particularly in murals and manuscripts commissioned by the ruling family for their sanctuaries as the capital moved from Tholing to Dunkar and then back to Tholing.<sup>②</sup> Certainly one might surmise that the painters of this thangka of Bhaiṣajyaguru may have seen similar Kashmiri illuminations in the ca. 11th century manuscripts of *Prajñāparamita* preciousy conserved in the monastery libraries of Tholing. In the period of the Gelugpa expansion which began shortly after Tsongkhapa's death in central Tibet in 1419, some of his pupils returned to their native region of Guge bringing works of art to serve as models in their newly founded temples there. This led to the reintroduction to Guge of certain characteristic aesthetic elements popular in central Tibet, reflecting Newar influences (for example, the stance and elaborate pleats of the dhoti garments of Suryagarbha and Candragarbha

<sup>①</sup> This manuscript was discovered by Tucci in Tholing ca 1935 and subsequently brought to Rome where it is now conserved in the Tucci Archives (accession number 1329 E). It is studied in my forthcoming publication, "Three Ancient Illuminated Tibetan Manuscripts from the Tucci collection, IsIAO" with aesthetic analysis and radio-carbon date of the manuscript. For Kashmiri aesthetic in the most ancient extant mural paintings and sculpture at Tholing, see A. Heller, "Donor inscriptions and iconography of an 11th-century Mchod rten at Tholing."

<sup>②</sup> See Roberto Vitali, *Records of Tholing*, 1999:33 for the transfer of the Guge capital from Tholing to Dunkar; for the Dunkar/Phyang mural paintings in Kashmiri aesthetic, see Helmut Neumann, "The cave of the offering goddesses: Early painting in West Tibet". *Oriental Art* XLIV(4), 1998: 52—60.



flanking Bhaiṣajyaguru),<sup>①</sup> while the ancient Kashmiri aesthetic was still highly esteemed in the Guge kingdom. The elegant fusion of these two distinct aesthetic tendencies may be seen in the c. 1470 -1480 murals of the Red Temple at Tsaparang, a royal sanctuary near Tholing. In particular, the present thangka of the Medicine Buddha shows a striking similarity to the Red Temple's monumental murals of the Five Buddhas (see Figure 8, photograph by Yvon Heller), where the monastic robes and especially the cinched waist with narrow pleated fabric, as well as the facial features and round usnisha of the Buddha.<sup>②</sup> The treatment of the halo and the more voluminous layers of folds of the garment over the legs suggest, however, that the Tsaparang mural is slightly later. The iconographic program of this temple included as well the Medicine Buddha cycle.<sup>③</sup> The importance of the Medicine Buddha cycle at the Red Temple, represented in both clay sculpture and mural paintings, and the marked aesthetic affinity to the Akshobhya mural of the Red Temple lead to the hypothesis that the present painting of the Medicine Buddha and his entourage may have been one of the portable paintings which served as a model and inspired the painters working for the commission of the Kings of Guge on the murals of the Red Temple at Tsaparang.

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Figure 2-3. Bhaiṣajyaguru mural paintings, Par cave, approximate dimensions of each panel, 13th century, pigments on stucco, 359cm wide, 214cm high. photographs by David Pritzer, 2012.

Figure 4. Bhaiṣajyaguru maṇḍala (detail), Khojarnath, 14th century, photograph by Helmut and Heidi Neumann, 2005.

Figure 5. Bhaiṣajyaguru mural paintings (detail), Pang gra phug, late 13th century, photograph by Helmut and Heidi Neumann, 2005

Figure 6. Bhaiṣajyaguru and his entourage (detail), late 15th to early 16th century, pigments on cotton, 80.6 x 61.6 cm, after G. Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, plate 31, now conserved in Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.77.19.13.

Figure 7. Illumination in a Prajñāparamita manuscript from Tholing, pigments and gold on

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① Ca. 1200, the expansion of the Brigung from Central Tibet to found hermitages in the Kailash region already introduced a phase of artistic influence from central Tibet to Kailash, the area of western Tibet near Tholing and eventually reaching as far as Alchi in Ladakh (see Christian Luczanits, "Alchi and the Drigungpa School of Tibetan Buddhism: The teacher depiction in the Small Chörten of Alchi" (2008) and earlier "On an Unusual Painting Style in Ladakh."). In the early 15th century, the Dge lugs pa again introduced aesthetic influences from Central Tibet.

② On the Tsaparang murals, see Helfried Weyer and Jürgen Aschoff, *Tsaparang Tibet's Grosses Geheimnis*, Eulen Verlag, 1987. Tucci photographed the same Akshobhya mural of the Red Temple, see plate CXXII in *Indo-Tibetica*, vol. III/2.

③ Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica*, vol. III/2 p.132. Tucci does not illustrate these murals of the Red Temple, however in the same temple, there were also the clay sculptures of the Eight Medicine Buddha (see Marilyn Rhie and Robert Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion*, 1996: 58 for a photograph of the sculpture).

paper, 9.8 x 8.9 cm, accession number 1329E, IsIAO Roma, photograph by the author.

Figure 8. Akṣobhya mural (detail), pigments on stucco, Red Temple, Tsaparang, photograph by Yvon Heller 1999.

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