**Books as Buddhas: A Study of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s *Wish-Fulfilling King***

A Dissertation Proposal

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## 1. Brief Description

This dissertation takes a visually compelling example of treating a book as a buddha and traces its origin through that of an individual work in order to draw broader conclusions about the nature of books in Buddhism. The unique approach corrects a prominent misreading of these compelling images, opens a new textual, visual, and ritual tradition from which to appreciate Buddhist book culture, and demonstrates how the textual, visual, and ritual dimensions come together in this tradition to express the possibility of books being buddhas.

## 2. Thesis and Scope

A common arrangement for a mandala incorporates a primary deity at the mandala’s center surrounded by a retinue of others. An especially interesting eighteenth-century Medicine Buddha mandala (sangs rgyas sman bla dkyil ‘khor) from China keeps the retinue of other deities but replaces the primary figural Medicine Buddha (San. Bhaiṣajyaguru, Tib. sman bla) at the center with a book (Figures 1 and 2).[[1]](#footnote-1) In effect, the mandala is a visually compelling suggestion that a book can be considered a buddha. This particular mandala has received no attention in the scholarship, and the leading theory on Medicine Buddha mandalas with texts claims that the book is a volume of the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramita*). My dissertation disrupts this reading and provides a new one based on *The Wish-Fulfilling King*: *An Arrangement of a Ritual for the Veneration of the Seven Sugatas* (*bde gshegs bdun gyi mchod pa’i chog bsgrigs yid bzhin bdang rgyal*), a ritual manual for the veneration of the seven buddhas of healing, composed in 1673 by the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lopsang Gyatso (ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, A picture containing text, furniture, rug, indoor

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Figure 1. 18th century Geluk thangka from China. Image courtesy of Himalayan Art Resources (HAR).

A picture containing text, indoor, furniture, old

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Figure 2. Detail of the text in Figure 1. Image courtesy of HAR.

*The* *Wish-Fulfilling King* (*yid bzhin bdang rgyal*) elaborates a ritual based on a sūtra found in the Tibetan Kangyur (*bka’ ‘gyur*) titled *The Detailed Account of the Previous Aspirations of the Seven Tathāgatas* (*de bzhin gshegs pa bdun gyi sngon gyi smon lam gyi khyad par rgyas pa*; hereafter the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra*). In its last section, *The* *Wish-Fulfilling King* invites practitioners to place the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* at the center of the Medicine Buddha mandala being constructed for that ritual. Although it is currently unclear if this invitation was the Fifth Dalai Lama’s innovation, the Dalai Lama’s text plainly identifies the book as a volume of the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra*. Once the Dalai Lama’s text is considered, it becomes more likely that the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra*, and not a volume of the Perfection of Wisdom, is at the center of the Medicine Buddha mandala.

While my dissertation seeks to substantiate this claim through a text-critical analysis of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s *Wish-Fulfilling King* and an art-historical analysis of the Medicine Buddha mandala, clarifying this history also opens new possibilities for understanding the nature of Buddhist books. Many of the conclusions drawn about them have been pulled from Perfection of Wisdom literature. Despite bearing hallmarks of the genre, *The Wish-Fulfilling King* andthe *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* are not Perfection of Wisdom texts, and correspondingly the visually compelling example of a book being a buddha is not a volume of the Perfection of Wisdom. In that context, chapters one through three highlight textual, visual, and ritual expressions of books as buddhas, respectively. This culminates in chapter four, which takes up new materialism to discuss how the texts, images, and rituals of this tradition co-constitute the possibility of books as buddhas. Chapter five provides the first complete English translation of *The* *Wish-Fulfilling King*.

## 3. Methodology

I adopt a critically realist approach to my sources, where *critical realism* understands that access to and knowledge of the world (what is ontologically and epistemically available) is neither given nor absolutely answerable to us because access and knowledge are always mediated historically and socially. In effect, there is no “God’s-eye” point of view, but communities of inquirers, whose real sociohistorical circumstances give them some purchase on the world, and what any of these communities picks out as significant is never total, always contingent, and subject to ongoing reinterpretations.

A critically realist approach neither treats sources as whole and complete nor seeks to gain access to the true intentions of their authors. It accepts that sources underwrite possible worlds, and that some of these worlds are available in the present due to the real sociohistorical circumstances in which certain communities of inquirers now find themselves. Accordingly, this dissertation is not the final word on the subjects discussed herein. Rather, my hope is that the picture I develop of books as buddhas stands as an attractive one based upon my access to and knowledge of the world.

Perhaps most significantly, this dissertation is a philosophical investigation into the possibility of books as buddhas carried out through a specific textual, visual, and ritual tradition. The regulative assumption of my investigation is the new materialist view of matter as inherently active and meaningful. For that reason, I do not treat my sources as passive objects onto which humans cast meaning but as agents, cocreating what it means for a book to be a buddha. Consequently, this is not an investigation into how these sources represent a more fundamental expression of buddhahood, but rather an investigation into what they must be like to perform buddhahood.

## 4. Significance and Contribution to the Discipline

My dissertation offers a distinctive approach to the study of Buddhist books, taking a visually compelling example of a book as a buddha and tracing its history through that of an individual work in order to draw broader conclusions about the nature of the book in Buddhism. Elucidating the unresolved history of the Medicine Buddha mandala in relation to *The Wish-Fulfilling King* is a significant contribution to Buddhist studies in its own right, but the study also animates a new textual, visual, and ritual tradition from which to understand the nature of Buddhist books. So far, many of the conclusions about them have been pulled from Perfection of Wisdom literature. By contrast, *The Wish-Fulfilling King* and the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* are not Perfection of Wisdom texts, and correspondingly it is not a volume of the Perfection of Wisdom at the center of the Medicine Buddha mandala.

Although this dissertation is partly text-critical, it recognizes its sources reveal uniquely generative ideas that shape understanding differently than purely textual accounts. For example, the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* at the center of the Medicine Buddha mandala is not obviously a book in any colloquial sense of the term; it is an image of a book. Moreover, *The Wish-Fulfilling King* is a ritual manual that prescribes the proper way to venerate the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra*. The implications of these visual and performative elements contribute to an overall conception of what a book is in Buddhism. Engaging them alongside textual accounts demonstrate how the textual, visual, and ritual dimensions come together in this specific tradition to express the possibility of books being buddhas. This possibility evinces a different conception of materiality, which, taken seriously, has the potential to greatly enrich the Anglophone canon in material studies by rearticulating the prevailing view that treats objects like books as passive rather than active and agentive.

## 5. Proposed Chapter Outline

### **Chapter 1: Books as Buddhas**

Chapter 1 considers textual precedents within Buddhism for books being buddhas. Since the early history of Buddhism, Buddhists have placed different emphasis on what dimension of the Buddha is expressed in scripture. According to the Pāli canon, the Buddha’s utterances are not merely words, but he is present in them. For example, the *Mahāparinibāṇa Sutta* (*Great Nirvana-After-Death Sūtra*) maintains that once the Buddha has died, the words are the teacher.[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition to being able to hear the Buddha in the words he spoke, Mahāyāna sūtras acknowledge he is immanently visible. The *Śālistamba Sūtra* (*Rice Seedling Sūtra*), for instance, equates the Buddha and dependent origination (a doctrine about the nature of reality): “Whoever, monks perceives dependent origination, perceives the dharma. Whoever sees the dharma, sees the Buddha.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The parity Mahāyāna sūtras draw between the Buddha, his teachings (the *dharma*), and ultimate reality (expressed as dependent origination or emptiness) makes the Buddha omnipresent, but it is not easy to perceive the omnipresent nature of the Buddha. Consequently, in the Tibetan context, tantric practices develop that localize the Buddha in certain easily identifiable objects. These activities bring the parity between the Buddha, *dharma*, and ultimate reality more squarely into the bounds of perception for those who do not yet recognize the Buddha’s omnipresent nature. Following the consecration of a book, for example, Duldzin Dragpa Gyaltsen (‘dul ‘dzin grags pa rgyal mtshan, 1374-1434) calls practitioners to recognize that the awakened being (*yi dam*) has taken “the form of letters.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This chapter complements other studies that draw from Pāli and Mahāyāna sources to think about textual precedents for books being buddhas (Schopen 1975; Eubanks 2011; Kim 2013). Yet, it also goes beyond them, and attends to Pure Land and tantric texts in a Tibetan context. This approach broadens the current discourse on the nature of Buddhist books and deepens our appreciation of the handful of registers through which scriptural materials express the Buddha.

### **Chapter 2: Images of Books as Buddhas: Medicine Buddha Mandalas**

Chapter 2 concerns the current state scholarship on Medicine Buddha mandalas, provides the first extended analysis of a Medicine Buddha with a text, and lays the groundwork for thinking about the relationship between books and images of books. Depictions of the seven buddhas of healing likely emerge in a fifteenth century Tibetan context (Luczanits 2020). During this period, the deity Prajñāpāramitā, a female embodiment of the Perfection of Wisdomgenre, is sometimes depicted in Medicine Buddha mandalas. These Medicine Buddha mandalas predate those with texts, which seem to emerge sometime in the eighteenth century. The leading theory, voiced by Marylin Rhie and Robert Thurman (1999), is that a volume of the Perfection of Wisdom is at the center of Medicine Buddha mandalas with texts, and the theory has been generally accepted and repeated in the scholarship.[[5]](#footnote-5) Given precedents in India for images that express a parity between the deity Prajñāpāramitā and Perfection of Wisdom sūtras (Kinnard 1999), it is reasonable to surmise that the same parity is being expressed in Medicine Buddha mandalas with texts. However, *The Wish-Fulfilling King* problematizes this line of reasoning and strongly suggests the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* is being mistaken for a volume of the Perfection of Wisdom.

One possible approach to explicating such conundrums in Medicine Buddha mandala imagery involves looking at iconographic handbooks that stipulate the iconometry and ornamentation of primary figures in imagery (Cüppers et al., 2012). In addition to producing several of their own handbooks, Tibetan Buddhism possesses others based on Indian Buddhist sources preserved in Tibetan translation. Yet, none of these handbooks really account for the complex ways Tibetan Buddhist interpreters with considerable latitude adopted and continued to adapt Indian conventions. Likewise, those preserved in Tibetan are not helpful in the case of Medicine Buddha mandalas due to their emergence in a Tibetan context, where the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* itself appears to be the primary source of the iconographic program for the seven buddhas of healing.

Although opinion is divided on the exact origin of Medicine Buddha devotional practices involving imagery (Lee 2017), according to the Mahāyāna, the historical Buddha gave two discourses detailing the positive attributes and aspirations made in the previous lives of the seven buddhas of healing, including the preeminent Medicine Buddha.[[6]](#footnote-6) My methodology takes these discourses as the basis for the iconographic programs for the seven buddhas of healing that developed in Tibet. It involves comparing the eighteenth-century Medicine Buddha mandala with a text (see Figure 1) to the Buddha’s discourses on the seven buddhas of healing, and more specifically the Fifth Dalai Lama’s *Wish-Fulfilling King*.[[7]](#footnote-7) I conjecture that because the textual precedent for placing a book at the center of Medicine Buddha mandalas predates the visual tradition, the latter is probably derivative. I argue that Rhie and Thurman misidentify the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* as a volume of the Perfection of Wisdom in their reading of a nineteenth-century, central Tibetan Medicine Buddha mandala with a text. Further, the connections I make are strong enough to duplicate my methodology and call into question other readings of Medicine Buddha mandalas with texts that follow Rhie and Thurman.

### **Chapter 3: Ritualizing Books as Buddhas: *The Wish-Fulfilling King***

Chapter 3 traces the history of *The Wish-Fulfilling King* in Tibet and provides an evidentiary basis for rereading Medicine Buddha mandalas with texts. The tradition credits the great Indian scholar Śāntarakṣita (zi ba ‘tsho, 725-788) with writing the earliest works on the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra*, and the relationship between the introduction of his three treatises to Tibet and the Fifth Dalai Lama’s own work is largely uncharted.[[8]](#footnote-8) Śāntarakṣita wrote the treatises at the request of the Tibetan emperor Tri Songdetsen (khri srong lde btsan, 742-800), where they were maintained in the royal court and subsequently transmitted through Tri Songdetsen’s successors. The transmission lineage converted to the Fifth Dalai Lama in the seventeenth century, when the political and spiritual leadership of Tibet converged in him. Śāntarakṣita’s treatises advise practitioners to recite the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* as much as possible, but unlike *The Wish-Fulfilling King*, they do not invite practitioners to place the sūtra at the center of the ritual mandala.

Importantly, the invitation that shows up in the Dalai Lama’s text might not be his innovation because he was not working in isolation, but likely drawing directly from his teachers. For instance, in his biography of Khonton Peljor Lhundrub (‘khon ston ‘byor lhun grub, 1561-1637), the Fifth Dalai Lama mentions Khontonpa’s *Empowerment Ritual of the Seven Sugatas of Medicine Buddha* (*sman bla bde gshegs bdun gyi dbang chog phan bde’i byung gnas*), a ritual liturgy on the seven buddhas of healing that may not be extant. Likewise, although we do not know the exact reason for the two different naming traditions, the Dalai Lama seems to be following another of his teachers, the first Panchen lama, Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1570-1662), when he refers to the seven buddhas of healing as the Seven Sugatas (*bde bar gshegs pa bdun*) rather than the Seven Tathāgatas (*de bzhin gshegs pa bdun*).[[9]](#footnote-9) Drawing out and making sense of these kinds of connections is necessary to appreciate any novel contributions the Dalai Lama made to medicine buddha rituals.

Accordingly, this chapter catalogues treatises on the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra*, primarily making use of special collections in India at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA). To contextualize these treatises, the chapter is picking up many threads from a previous study on *The Wish-Fulfilling King* (Nourse 2021). Additional connections that help put these treatises in context include ascertaining why the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* is classified in the Tibetan tradition as a sūtra at times and an action tantra at others, determining whether any liturgies are based on the shorter version of the *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra*,[[10]](#footnote-10) and explaining why Amitābha Buddha sometimes appears in imagery related to the seven buddhas of healing. The chapter pays special attention to how books get taken up in ritual performances, and ultimately provides the grounding to correct the current tendency to claim a Perfection of Wisdom text is at the center of Medicine Buddha mandalas with texts.

### **Chapter 4: A New Materialist Reading of Books as Buddhas**

Chapter 4 puts Buddhism and new materialism in dialogue for the first time and provides a new materialist reading of books as buddhas following the research program set out in the previous chapters. The foregoing chapters have emphasized a material and ritual rather than purely text-critical engagement with the possibility of books as buddhas. They have demonstrated that the Perfection of Wisdom genre is not the only place to turn when considering this possibility and that images and ritual performances are uniquely generative of and contribute to it. I weave these threads together following Thomas Nail’s work on new materialism (2019a/b). The conceptual starting point for new materialisms is the view that matter is not passive but active (Gamble, et al., 2019). Nail’s focus is on the primacy of motion or movement, and I will discuss how Buddhist books, images, and rituals generate different patterns of motion that express buddhahood or contribute to the possibility of a book being a buddha.

I start with what materiality does more generally and then concentrate on what Buddhist books, images, and ritual performances do more specifically. More generally, materiality or matter is in motion (or motion is constitutive of beings themselves), and every phenomenon is a participant in this more general performance of matter. As such, objects like Buddhist books and mandalas constitute (or perform) agency differently and interactively through their materiality. For instance, they perform history (foreclosing or maintaining what is remembered) and relationships (governing how we connect with the world and others and producing new ways of connecting). This performative view of matter recognizes that the material conditions of Buddhist books and mandalas produce and delimit (though never fully determine) the conditions of their circulation and persistence. At the same time, their materiality helps enable or disable the materialization of other bodies. For instance, the consumption of books and mandalas encourage different patterns of motion, such as ritual performances. In effect, Buddhist books and mandalas are differentiated from other materials only in their capacities for making salient Buddhist concerns. This accords with the Buddhist view that the Buddha’s awakened qualities are omnipresent, and that, as such, all matter can in principle articulate Buddhism⎯or, in this case, be a buddha.

### **Chapter 5: Translation of *The Wish-Fulfilling King***

Chapter 5 is a complete English translation of *The Wish-Fulfilling King* based upon the Tibetan language editions that my study followed. Although the text has been translated into Chinese and Mongolian, it has hitherto not been available in English. As much as my dissertation is a visual study, it is also a literary one, with the Dalai Lama’s text serving as an evidentiary basis for rereading Medicine Buddha mandalas with texts. In addition to the visual sources my dissertation highlights, this chapter will give readers interested in similar research agendas a chance to familiarize themselves with one of the most important works in the conversation.

## 6. Statement of Bibliographical Method

In order to discern relevant sources for this dissertation, I have drawn heavily on my background in philosophy and coursework for the JDP. That said, research for this specific topic began in earnest in the Winter 2022 quarter, during my Comprehensive Review IV: Knowledge in Minor Areas and Subfields, which took material perspectives on sacred books in Buddhism as its subject. My advisor and second reader for that exam have remained indispensable resources, pointing me toward key works and informing me about new materials. In addition to mining each of the primary and secondary sources that became the bibliography for that comprehensive exam, I continue to collect resources through Compass, Prospector, and WorldCat, as well as pursuing more targeted searches using databases like JSTOR and the ALTA Religion Database.

My searches are centered around seven individual or linked topics: (1) medicine buddha, (2) mandala, (3) Tibetan medical paintings, (4) Buddhist medicine, (5) Buddhist book culture, (6) the Fifth Dalai Lama, (7) and new materialism. In order to track down specific Tibetan texts and figures, I consult various online library resources that are specific to Buddhist studies. These include the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, and The Treasury of Lives. Additionally, Himalayan Art Resources is a Buddhist studies resource that has been indispensable for dating and locating the Medicine Buddha mandalas. My resources at this point range from the first century CE to the present day.

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1. The provenance of this Medicine Buddha Mandala, as with some many other Tibetan images and objects, is indeterminate and was probably sold under duress by Tibetans fleeing the Cultural Revolution. While the Rubin Museum of Art provides as much transparency as possible for the image, its very existence in the museum expresses an American institution benefiting from devastated Tibetans and a politically fraught power-asymmetry between Tibet and China. Although it does not resolve these and other moral issues, the current Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has express his wishes for institutions like the Rubin to safeguard Tibetan heritage. Further, these tantric types of images were (*are*) not meant to be seen by lay people. The image, then, is stripped from its religious and cultural specificity and recontextualized at the Rubin. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “And the Lord said to Ānanda: Ānanda, it may be that you will think: ‘The Teacher’s instruction has ceased, now we have no teacher!’ It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as Dhamma and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher” (DN 16: 269-271). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. dge slong dag sus rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba mthong ba des chos mthong ngo | sus chos mthong ba des sangs rgyas mthong ngo zhes de skad bka' stsal nas (“sa luʼi ljang paʼi mdo.” *bkaʼ ʼgyur* (*snar thang*), vol. 62, Yeshe De Dharma Publications, 2009, 381). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bentor, “Literature of Consecration (*Rap gnas*),” 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the Medicine Buddha Mandalas that include texts collected on Himalayan Art Resources (HAR). For example, take no. 146 (https://www.himalayanart.org/items/146), which is currently in a collection at the Rubin Museum of Art. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The first discourse is the longer *Seven Tathāgatas Sūtra* (Toh 503) and the second is the shorter sūtra (Toh 504) titled *The Detailed Account of the Previous Aspirations of the Venerable Medicine Buddha* (*’phags pa bcom ldan ’das sman gyi bla bai durya’i ’od gyi smon lam gyi khyad par rgyas pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po’i mdo*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I chose this specific mandala because it is an early iteration of a Geluk Medicine Buddha Mandala with a text at its center and hence a work from within the institution of the Dalai Lamas. It is also legible and accessible. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Located in the Tibetan Tengyur (bstan ‘gyur), the longest of Śāntarakṣita’s three works is titled *A Ritual for the Recitation of the Incantations of the Detailed Account of the Previous Aspirations of the Seven Tathāgatas*, *A Condensation of the Sūtras* (*de bzhin gshegs pa bdun gyi sngon gyi smon lam gyi khyad par rgyas pa’i gzungs bklag pa’i cho gam do sde las btus*). The two shorter works are titled *Personal Instructions on the Sūtra of the Detailed Account of the Previous Aspirations of the Seven Tathāgatas* (*de bzhin gshegs pa bdun gyi sngon gyi smon lam gyi khyad par rgyas pa’i mdo sde’i man ngag*) and *A Recitation of the Sūtra titled “The Detailed Account of the Previous Aspirations of the Seven Tathāgatas, along with the Discourse that Presents the Offerings and Rites of the Aspirations Associated with the Seven Tathāgatas* (*de bzhin gshegs pa bdun gyi sngon gyi smon lam gyi khyad par rgyas pa zhes bya ba’i mdo sde bklag cing de bzhin gshegs pa bdun mchod de smon lam gdab pa’i cho ga mdo sde las btus te rim par bklag pa*). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen’s ritual manual, located in his collected works (*gsung ‘bum*), titled *The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel: A Liturgy for the Worship of the Venerable Seven Buddhas of Medicine* (*bcom ldan ‘das sman bla’i mdo chog gyi snying po bsdus pa yid bzhin gyi nor bu*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The exact relationship between Toh 504 and 503 still needs to be worked out. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)