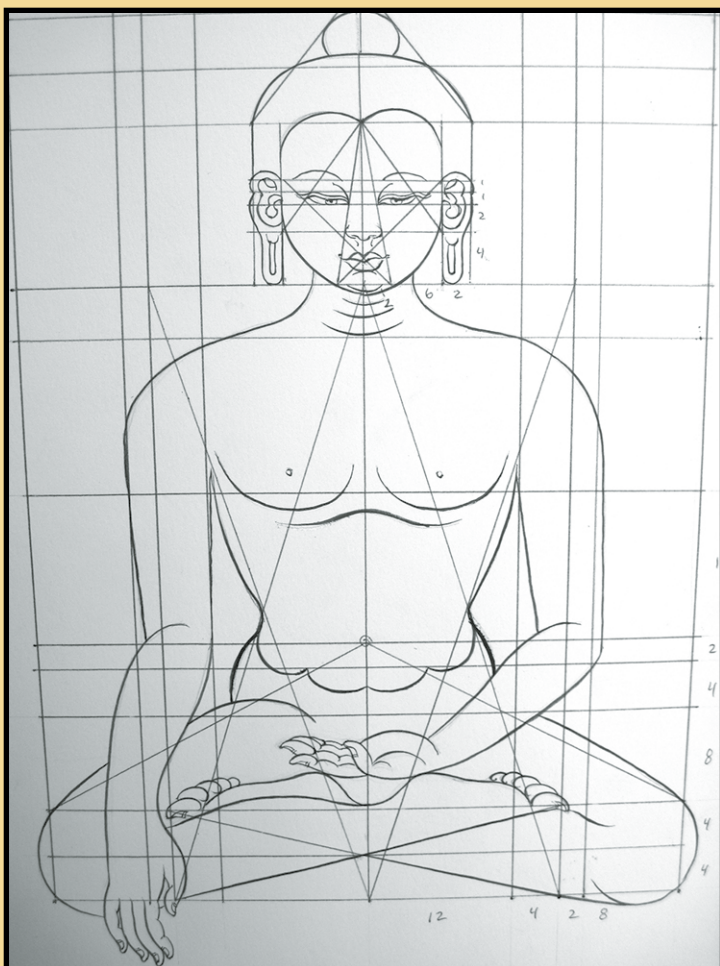


Drawing the Buddha's Sublime Form

Buddhist Artist Rob Davis on Internalizing the Image of the Buddha in Tantric Art

**Chenrezig,
Lord of Compassion**



Buddha Shakyamuni with proportional grid, ink

In the Vajrayana lineages of Buddhism it is known that images of Buddhas, their perfect, luminous, and empty form, contain the wisdom of the teachings.



While this practice can lead to the creation of thangka paintings, it is also an active form of contemplation and meditation, a cultivation of awareness centered in the sublimity of the Buddha's image.



Buddha Shakyamuni in Robes in Pureland, ink

By Rob Davis

Since its founding in 1990, the Tsogyelgar Dharma Center on West Liberty has steadily become a treasure to behold in Ann Arbor. In our May thru August 2010 issue (available on our archive at crazywisdom.net), we featured the developments that were transforming this Vajrayana Buddhist community's farm property, including the construction of amazing gardens, a mirror hut, and tantric murals. **Rob Davis** is the Buddhist artist who created those spectacular murals. Here he shares the conventions, artistry, and beauty of his process.

In 2006, I had the great fortune to meet Traktung Rinpoche in Ann Arbor. I attended a retreat where Rinpoche taught practices of the Nyingma Lineage. These included meditation on "deities," such as the image of the Buddha. In the Vajrayana lineages of Buddhism it is known that images of Buddhas, their perfect, luminous, and empty form, contain the wisdom of the teachings. They are not signs. They are living symbols, the teachings in themselves. I was inspired as an artist to serve the beauty of Traktung Rinpoche's teachings and the place of art in these practices.

The principle practice of learning to paint deities according to the master thangka painter Pema Rinzin is *Drawing and Inking the Buddha*. I learned to draw and ink the Buddha during a three-year period of training with Mr. Rinzin in New York. At that time, Mr. Rinzin was the first Artist-in-Residence at the Rubin Museum of Art.

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The artist's internalization of the proportions of the Buddha is thus only the beginning of making art.

Learning to draw and ink the Buddha is a practice given from teacher to student. It is a living lineage of artistic transmission. While this practice can lead to the creation of thangka paintings, it is also an active form of contemplation and meditation, a cultivation of awareness centered in the sublimity of the Buddha's image.

What is *Drawing the Buddha*? The painting traditions from the Tibetan regions are known for their use of 'grids.' These grids are guides to the proportions and contours of the Buddhas. They are largely training guides for students. Thus, the presence of the Buddha as the central proportion is the sacred origin of this art and the grid is a tool through which we understand this. Like any other tradition of conventions, the art does not achieve sacredness or beauty simply by following the grids. Conventions are limitations as much as they are useful for learning. The artist's internalization of the proportions of the Buddha is thus only the beginning of making art.

The grid for Buddha Shakyamuni is based on the unit measurement of twelve. This unit is the Buddha's face proportion. All the other proportions are based in this unit. To copy Buddha, one must pay close attention to the Buddha's form within the grid. The image one copies is Buddha Shakyamuni, the image of the Buddha at the moment of enlightenment, painted by one's teacher. His right hand is in the "earth touch mudra" and his left holds a bowl of nectar. His eyes, deep in samadhi, express the limitless compassion and indestructible wisdom of the enlightened state. Every line in the image is essential, expressing delicacy and grace. The first image a student begins is the Buddha without robes. This initial image is a harmonious simplicity that becomes the basis of all forms in general and all male figures in particular. Tara is the basis of all female forms. After drawings are made, one is ready to ink with a brush. This is the formal basis of the thangka craft: the use of the brush.

"The mind is in the line," Pema Rinzin once said, and much of the unique aesthetic achievements of Tibetan art are found in its line use. Each form in a finished thangka finds its completion with expressive outlines. The cultivation of line quality is the student's main task. To make a line fine and precise, while also being free

Manjushri, Buddha of Wisdom



Prajnaparamita, "Perfection of Wisdom," Mother of All Buddhas



and uncontrived, is the sign of mastery. This is achieved by inking numerous Buddhas. The cultivated use of the brush in this manner is tremendously rewarding and joyful, creating a deep connection between one's perception and one's action. It is thus a practice of mindfulness. The brush teaches one to see how each moment requires complete awareness and relaxation. In inking the Buddha, one becomes aware of the interrelatedness of each element: the drawing, the ink, the brush, and the work of the hand. This observed practice thus translates to all other creative disciplines. It teaches the student to become aware of every element that is being utilized, including one's attention. It is thus universal in its application. It is a form of impersonal training and submission, which, when mastered, allows the artist to express specificity and individuality.

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While the subtleties and disciplines of *Drawing the Buddha* were given by my painting teacher Pema Rinzin, Traktung Rinpoche taught me the implication and profundity of this practice: "To contemplate the form of the Buddha purifies negative karmas of the senses and to draw Buddha purifies similar karmas of the hands." According to Buddhism, Buddha Nature, the awakened state, is the natural state of every being. Thus the image of the Buddha is the image of every person's true nature. This was Buddha Shakyamuni's teaching at the moment of enlightenment: "How amazing, how marvelous that all beings have been, since the beginning, Buddha." This moment is the image we draw of the Buddha.

Rinpoche teaches that a human being is composed of many organs of knowledge, many centers of perception, and that contemplation of sublime forms such as Buddha, particularly through aesthetic creation, cultivates higher impressions. These impressions make integration of these 'organs' possible. The integration of organs

of knowledge into a single whole, deepened as they are by aesthetic beauty, make meditation, and thus, true knowledge possible. To internalize the Buddha through this work, then, is not simply a rote task for making paintings, but a form of meditation that enriches our capacities as human beings to know ourselves. To internalize the image of the Buddha, of Tara, of Manjushri, is thus to engage one's own true nature directly and to become sensitive to the ability to know this fact.

Not only do we train ourselves to make this image for others, we train ourselves in the meditative ability to become the image of our own highest aspiration: wisdom and compassion, the Buddha. In the simple practice of *Drawing the Buddha*, we steep our minds in an image of enlightened qualities — qualities we intuit are our actual natures. *Drawing the Buddha* also creates one other simple form of enjoyment easily missed in our culture of action based on fun — pleasure — the pleasure of aesthetic discipline. To find facility with the brush, making the sinuous lines of the Buddha's form, is pleasurable. I now teach this practice at venues in Ann Arbor, including the University of Michigan Museum of Art. It is extremely beneficial for all artists and equally beneficial for people who want to train in focus, mindfulness and meditation.

Rob Davis is an artist and art teacher. In 2008, under the guidance of his teacher Traktung Rinpoche, he painted the Tsogyelgar Murals in Ann Arbor, where he now lives. Rob studied thangka painting with Mantang lineage master Pema Rinzin in New York City. He can be reached at robdisabi@gmail.com. To learn more about Tsogyelgar or to plan a trip to see the murals, visit tsogyelgar.org. For more information on Rob Davis's classes, visit the *UMMA Workshops Calendar* on www.annarborartcenter.org.