

My understanding of Buddhism in pictures

2019 Pacific Neighborhood Consortium
Annual Conference and Joint Meetings

Regionality and Digital Humanities: South-South Connections
15–18 October, 2019

by Vello Vaartnou

Introduction

As we all know from school - the Newton gravity law rules everything:
the further away the object is from the body that affects it, the more slowly it moves.

From school we also know that the world consists of atoms.

In the 30s appeared one female astronomer, Vera Rubin, who did not want to compete with men in exploring the black holes, and chose Andromeda Galaxy as her field of study.

If we look at our Galaxy, then our celestial bodies move according to Newton's law but she found that in Andromeda Galaxy all bodies move at the same speed, it was against Newton law. Some force made them move such way. Later it was discovered to be dark matter.

In the standard Lambda-CDM model of cosmology, the total mass–energy of the universe contains 5% ordinary matter and energy, 27% dark matter and 68% of an unknown form of energy known as dark energy. Thus, dark matter constitutes 85% of total mass, while dark energy plus dark matter constitute 95% of total mass–energy content.

By the way, we do not know anything about this dark matter and dark energy except that it exists.

In my opinion, the same applies to the knowledge of Buddhism.

Firstly, Tibetan Buddhism originated in the 7th century, we live in the 21st century. All environment and understanding has been changed.

Tibetans deified surrounding at the time when Padma came to Tibet, and based on that, our days it is difficult to divine airplanes and spaceships and put them in line with Buddhist texts.

Therefore, when studying Buddhism we should consider artificial world that we have created ourselves. Unfortunately, modern times do not produce Nagarjunas who would put Buddhism into contemporary context, and would be able to add something from contemporary world to Yogacara and Shunyata.

I understand, this is my approach and attitude toward Buddhism. I would like if our days Buddhists would add to these terms such as Buddhist philosophy and tantrism according contemporary time.

Therefore, I will talk today about visualisation using materials what the others have considered or understood about visualisation.

Generally, I think differently, and look at the aspects of visualisation as states of mind which should be experienced by everyone who write about visualisation. It should be a special state of mind according to tantras.

Therefore, this writing does not claim to be authentic from tibetological aspect, but is collected from others opinions and organised logically. This is a preface to my presentation.

Thangka

- 'What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.' Napoleon Hill
- A thangka, variously spelt as thangka, tangka, thanka, or tanka, is a Tibetan Buddhist painting which is painted on cotton, (can be also silk appliqué), and usually depict a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala.
- Thangkas are traditionally kept unframed and rolled up when not on display, mounted on a textile backing like Chinese scroll paintings, with a silk cover on the front. They have to be kept in dry places where moisture will not affect the quality of the silk, such way thangkas can last a long time.

The composition of a thangka, as with the majority of Buddhist art, is highly geometric. Most thangkas are in size close to a Western half-length portrait, some are extremely large, several metres in each dimension. These thangkas were designed to be displayed on a monastery wall as part of religious festivals. These may be sixty or more feet across and perhaps twenty or more high.

- Thangkas depict the life of the Buddha as well deities and bodhisattvas, as well various influential lamas. Common subject is The Wheel of Life , which is a visual representation of the Abhidharma teachings.
- Thangka has several different functions, most thangkas are for personal meditation or instruction of monastic students where a central deity is often surrounded by other identified figures in a symmetrical composition.
- The Vajrayana practitioner uses a image of their yidam or meditation deity as a guide, and visualizes himself as being that deity internalizing such way the Buddha qualities



Tsanyang Gyatso by V.Vaartnou.

- The term may also be used for reliefs in metal and woodblock prints. Today printed reproductions of painted thangka are often used for devotional as well as decorative purposes.
- Devotional images are often used as mediums through which one offers prayers or makes requests. Thangkas hang on beside altars, and may be hung in the bedrooms or offices of monks and other devotees.
- Overall, thangka is used as a meditation tool to help bring one further down the path to enlightenment. Therefore, a thangka is sometimes called a 'roadmap to enlightenment', as it shows you the way to fully awakened state of enlightenment.
- Somewhat related to thangkas are Tibetan tsakli, cards which look like miniature tangkas, up to 15 cm high, usually containing a single figure. These were produced in sets and were usually used in earlier stages of training monks, or as initiation cards or offerings, or to use when constructing temporary mandalas.
- Another related form is the painted wooden top cover for a manuscript book, giving a long narrow strip, typically some 6 cm by 55 cm, often painted with a row of seated figures in compartments. The techniques for both these forms are the same as for thangka,
- Sometimes all-textile tangkas are called as "tapestry", but most thangkas described as tapestry are some combination of embroidery, appliqué and other techniques.

Types of thangkas

- Thangkas can be grouped by technique and material into two broad categories: those that are painted and those made of silk, either by appliqué or embroidery.

- Thangkas are divided into more specific categories:

- 1) Painted in colours (Tib. tson-tang) the most common type

- 2) Appliqué (Tib.go-tang)

- 3) Black Background— (Tib.nagtang)gold line on a black backgroud

- 4) Gold Background—an auspicious treatment, used for peaceful, long-life deities and fully enlightened Buddhas

- 5) Red Background—(Tib. mar-tang) gold line, but referring to gold line on a vermillion

- 6) Blockprints — paper or cloth outlined renderings, bywoodcut/woodblock printing

- 7) Embroidery (Tib. tsem-thang)



Vaishravana by V.Vaartnou

Images on thangkas are divided generally into 11 categories:

- 1) Mandalas,
- 2) Assembly Trees
- 3) Tathagata Buddhas
- 4) Patriarchs
- 5) Avlokiteshvara
- 6) Buddha-Mother and female Bodhisattvas
- 7) Tutelary deities,
- 8) Dharma-protecting deities
- 9) Arhats
- 10) Wrathful deities
- 11) Other Bodhisattvas

Old thangkas have inscriptions on the back, usually there is the mantra of the deity depicted. Sometimes pious inscriptions were placed under the paint on the front of the image to be seen in the shape of a stupa or sometimes other shapes.



Manjusri Potala by V. Vaartnou

Mandala

- One of the richest visual objects in Tibetan Buddhism is the mandala.
- A mandala is a symbolic picture of the universe. It can be painted on a wall or scroll, created in coloured sands on a table, or a visualisation in the mind of a skilled practitioner.
- The purpose of mandala is to transform ordinary minds into enlightened ones and to assist with healing.
- The mandala represents an imaginary palace that house and contain the essence of a deity, the pure residence of the deity that is contemplated during meditation. Each object there has significance, represents an aspect of wisdom or remind the meditator of a guiding principle.



Tsam Guru by V.Vaartnou

- A mandala is usually associated with a some Buddha and his ascension to enlightenment. It symbolizes the universe, the miniature universe of the practitioner and the basis on which the Buddha addresses his followers.
- Buddhists use mandalas as aids for meditation, both making a mandala and gazing at one are regarded as forms of meditation.
- One well-known type of mandala is the mandala of the "Five Buddhas", archetypal Buddha forms embodying various aspects of enlightenment. Such Buddhas are depicted depending on the school of Buddhism, and even the specific purpose of the mandala. When paired with another mandala depicting the Five Wisdom Kings, this forms the Mandala of the Two Realms.
- The design for the mandala is said to have been brought to Tibet in the Ox Year of 749 by the legendary Guru Rinpoche.



White Tara by Vello Vaartnou

Levels of Mandala

- Mandalas can be painted, constructed of stone, embroidered, sculptured as well serve as the layout plan for entire monasteries.
- Common symbols used in mandalas include the wheel with eight spokes, lotus, and bell.
- Two of the main types of mandalas are healing mandalas and teaching mandalas.
- The third main type, sand mandalas, are created with dyed sand, and then destroyed to represent impermanence.

T



Vajrapani by V.Vaartnou

- The Kalachakra Mandala is like a huge palace, with 5 distinct floor levels: At the ground level is the Body Mandala and it has 4 huge entrance ways in the main directions. Within the Body Mandala, on a platform comes the Speech Mandala which looks very similar to the Body Mandala.
- At the center of the Speech mandala comes the Mind Mandala, which looks again very similar to the Body Mandala. The Mind Mandala has two more floor levels, the Exalted Wisdom Mandala and the Great Bliss Mandala.
- On a slightly raised platform is the central Great Bliss Mandala, with a large green lotus on which the main Deity Kalachakra with his consort Vishvamata resides, surrounded by the 8 Shaktis.
- The Kālacakra deity resides in the center of the mandala in his palace consisting of four mandalas, one within the other: the mandalas of body, speech, and mind, and in the very center, wisdom and great bliss.

There are three basic meanings to a mandala.

- 1)The outer meaning represents the divine form of the universe.
- 2)The inner meaning creates a map to guide the mind to enlightenment.
- 3)The secret meaning, however, remains between the artist and the creation as far as specific details. Overall, it represents a balance of body and mind infused with clarity.
- **Two dimensional mandalas** are regarded as part of the three' dimensional world of the central figure.
- During meditation a user focuses on the deity, visualizing deities associated with it, with the deity disappearing into emptiness and re-emerging as the deity.

- **Three-Dimensional Mandalas** look like sculpted celebrating cakes.
- The floor doors to the palace represent the 'four immeasurables'. There is a fire circle in which all negative forces are burned and transformed into wisdom.
- The main circular area has a diagram of a palace with four elaborately decorated gateways.
- This structure must be imagined as three'dimensional. From the square base, the palace rises up and is topped by a circle within a square containing the major deity,



Amitabha mandala by V.Vaartnou

Visualisation

- The technique of visualization is employed throughout the Vajrayana practices of Tibetan Buddhism. Visualization is also called mental imagery or mental rehearsal.
- The English word 'visualization' is actually wrong word because it implies something visual -it implies working with visual images and it also implies working with our eyes. This is incorrect. Instead, we are working with the imagination.
- When we work with the imagination we're are working also with imagined sounds, smells, physical sensations, feelings – emotional feelings – and so on. We do that with our minds, not with our eyes.
- Tibetan Buddhism develops both sides of the brain– both the intellectual, rational side and the side of creative imagination.
- Therefore, when we speak of visualization in Buddhism, we're talking about something quite practical- how to develop and use all our potentials, because we have potentials on both the right and left sides of the brain.
- We work with the imagination on many different levels which can be divided into
- 1) sutra methods and 2) tantra methods. Of these two, those of tantra methods are the most advanced.
- There are three levels in visualisation:
 1. visualising in mind, you see it in your mind
 2. visualising in front of yourself so that you can see it in front of you
 3. visualising in front of yourself so that others can see as well

- According to Vajrayana theory, our perception of this world is unique; it is not seen or experienced in the same way by anyone else.
- The main aim of visualization practice is to purify our ordinary, impure perception of the phenomenal world by developing “pure perception.”
- Unfortunately, ‘pure perception’ is another term that tends to be misunderstood. People try to re-create a photographic and static image of a Tibetan painting in their mind. Practicing this version of visualization, the whole idea of pure perception would be destroyed.
- On a deeper level, thangka paintings can be seen as a visual expression of the highest state of consciousness, which is the ultimate goal of the Buddhist spiritual path.
- Visualization can be both visual and kinesthetic - practitioner creates in mind the experience of doing something and might feel the sensations in his body, and experience the action in great detail in his mind.



White Tara with sunglasses by V.Vaartnou

- **Visualization Methods in Sutra**

- In sutra, we use our imaginations first of all to help us overcome negative aspects of ourselves, in other words, disturbing emotions and attitudes. develop good qualities, and become more realistic. When you start meditating on a regular basis, you gain access to your inner self more than you have ever before. From that inner place is where you can start to experience strong visualizations.

- **Visualization Methods in Tantra**

- The use of imagination in tantra is a very sophisticated topic. In tantra, imagination is used to imagine various Buddha-figures, yidam (yi-dam) in Tibetan.
- These Buddha-figures are sometimes referred to as “deities,” the Tibetan term being translated here, lhag-pay lha (lhag-pa'i lha), actually means “higher deities.” They are higher in the sense that they are not samsaric gods in a samsaric god-realm, but enlightened beings
- All these figures represent the full enlightenment of a Buddha and each of them also represents prominently a particular aspect of Buddhahood.

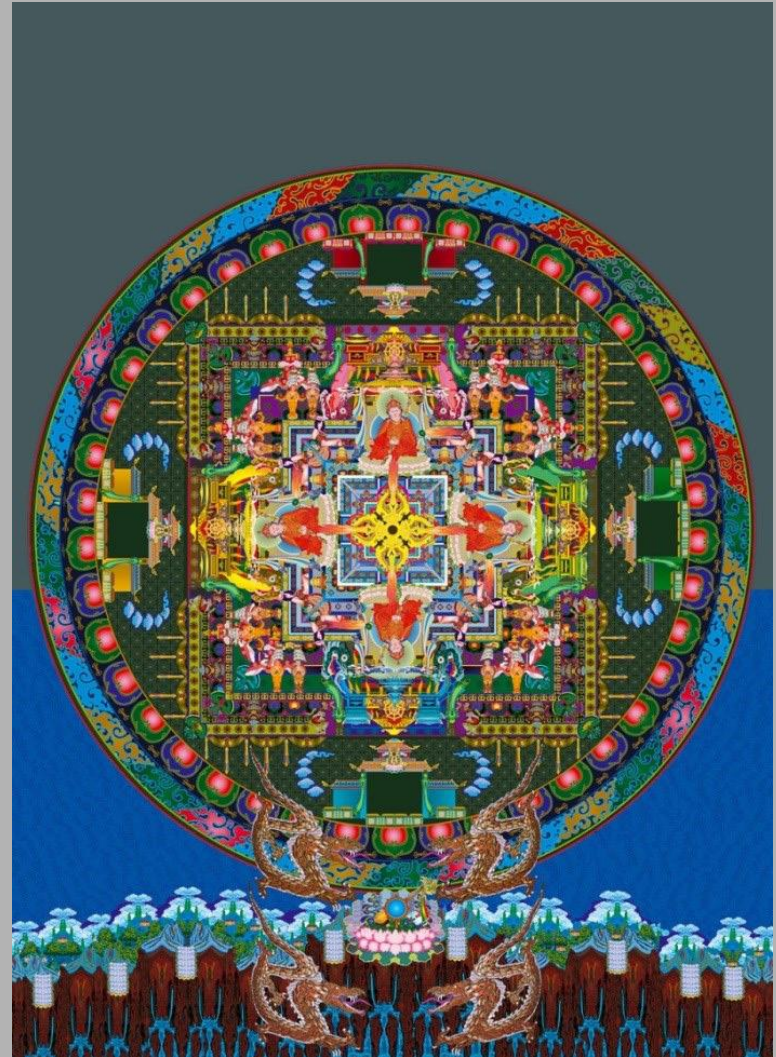


Akshobhya by V.Vaarnou

- When working with these Buddha-figures, we either imagine them in front of us or on top of our heads or, more frequently, we imagine ourselves in the form of one of them.
- Themes of meditation/reflection/visualisation are actually visualisations in regard of signs which purpose is to concentrate the mind, they also give ground for transcendent form by focusing on it.
- The other objects are visualisations of virtues (of the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) or reflections on own virtues (generosity, conduct, virtues like Devas) and then there are certain other visualisations of thoughts to more directly "change" ones level of awareness.

Visualization utilizes the right hemisphere of the brain that encodes information in images far more efficiently than the left hemisphere that is verbal/linguistic/logical/rational.

- The old saying is that "a picture is worth a thousand words."



Mandala V.Vaartnou

- The unconscious expresses archetypal information using visual images and prelinguistic symbols that are psychologically powerful and empowering.
- Visualization could be viewed as an exercise for the brain, which in turn affects the mind.
- Thus, the brain is sculpted by input, which in turn influences who we are or at the very least what we can do.
- Perception, particularly when profound, has effects on the brain and body, changing cardiorespiratory patterns, hormone release and all sorts of things.
- Presumably, if you could imagine the same percept very clearly, and sustained, it would lead to the same set of physiological changes.
- Tibetan Buddhist meditation, in the form of tantric practice is a profound approach to the complete transformation and liberation of our body, speech and mind from what limits and obscures their natural potential. All that we are is included within this path of alchemical transformation.



White Tara by V.Vaartnou

Tantra as western construction

- Term tantrism is a construction of western scholarship, not a concept that comes from the religious system itself. Tantrikas (practitioners of Tantra) never attempted to define Tantra as a whole the way Western scholars have. Rather, the Tantric dimension of each South Asian religion had its own name:

Tantric Shaivism was known to its practitioners as the Mantramarga,

Tantric Buddhism has the indigenous name of the Vajrayana

Tantric Vaishnavism was known as the Pañcaratna.

Visualisation of Vajrayana teachings

- The mandala can represent in visual form the core essence of the Vajrayana teachings, representing the nature of the Pure Land, Enlightened mind.
- The mandala is regarded as a place separated and protected from the changing and impure outer world, samsara, and is thus seen as a "Buddhfield" or a place of Nirvana and peace,
- A mandala can also represent the entire universe, which is traditionally depicted with Mount Meru as the axis mundi in the center, surrounded by the continents.



- In the mandala, the outer circle of fire usually symbolises wisdom.
- The major outer ring depicts the eight great charnel grounds.
- Inside these rings lie the walls of the mandala palace itself, populated by deities and Buddhas
- .One well-known type of mandala is the mandala of the "Five Buddhas", archetypal Buddha forms embodying various aspects of enlightenment.
- When paired with another mandala depicting the Five Wisdom Kings, this forms the Mandala of the Two Realms.



Vajrapani by V.Vaartnou

Practice

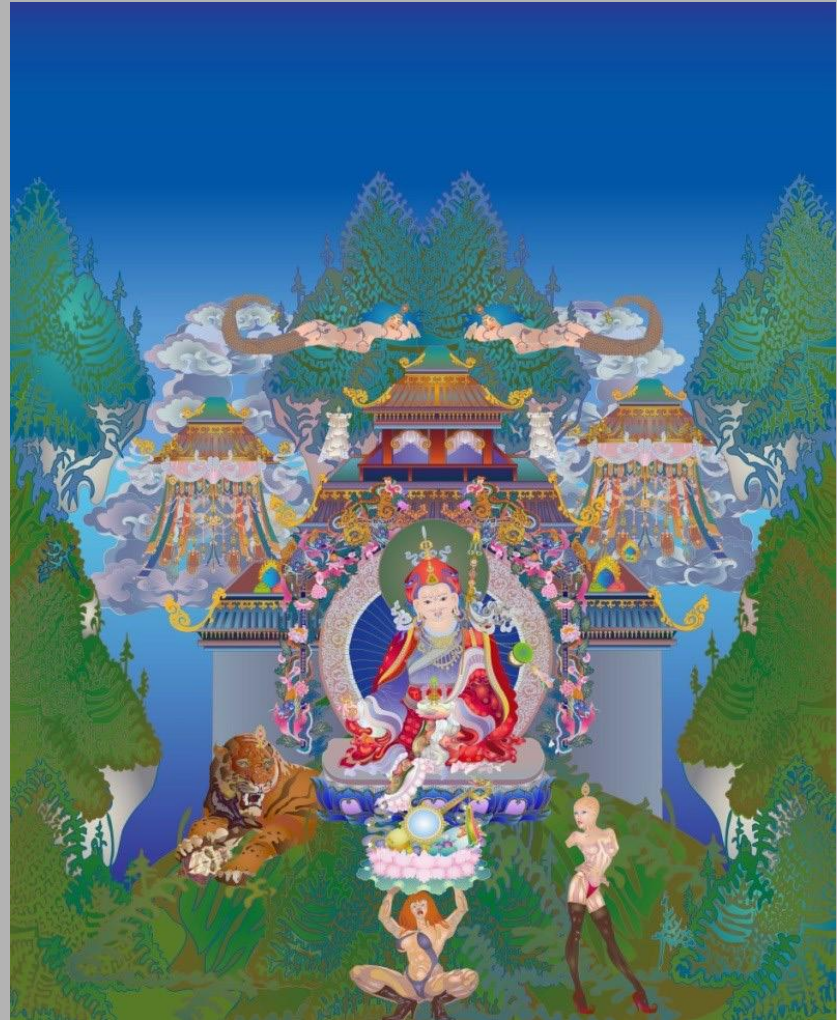
- Mandalas are commonly used by tantric Buddhists as an aid to meditation, the image of the mandala becomes fully internalised in the minutest detail and can then be summoned and contemplated at will as a clear and vivid visualized image.
- With every mandala come texts known as "tantras", instructing practitioners on how the mandala should be drawn, built and visualised, and indicating the mantras to be recited during its ritual use.
- By visualizing "pure lands", one learns to understand experience itself as pure, and as the abode of enlightenment

In many tantric mandalas, this aspect of separation and protection from the outer samsaric world is depicted by the four outer circles: the purifying fire of wisdom, the vajra circle, the circle with the eight tombs, the lotus circle. The ring of vajras forms a connected fence-like arrangement running around the perimeter of the outer mandala circle



Manjusri mandala by V.Vaartnou

- **A "mandala offering"** in Tibetan Buddhism is a symbolic offering of the entire universe. Every intricate detail of these mandalas is fixed in the tradition and has specific symbolic meanings, often on more than one level. Within Vajrayana practice, 100,000 of these mandala offerings (to create merit) can be part of the preliminary practices before a student even begins actual tantric practices. This mandala is generally structured according to the model of the universe as taught in a Buddhist classic text the Abhidharma-kosha, with Mount Meru at the centre, surrounded by the continents, oceans and mountains, etc.
- **Deity yoga** is what separates Buddhist Tantra practice from the practice of other Buddhist schools. Deity yoga (Tib. lha'i rnal 'byor; Sanskrit: Devata-yoga) is a practice of Vajrayana Buddhism involving identification with a chosen deity through visualisations and rituals, and the realisation of emptiness. Representations of the deity- statues, paintings, thangkas, or mandalas - are employed as an aid to visualization in both stages.
- Deity yoga has two stages.



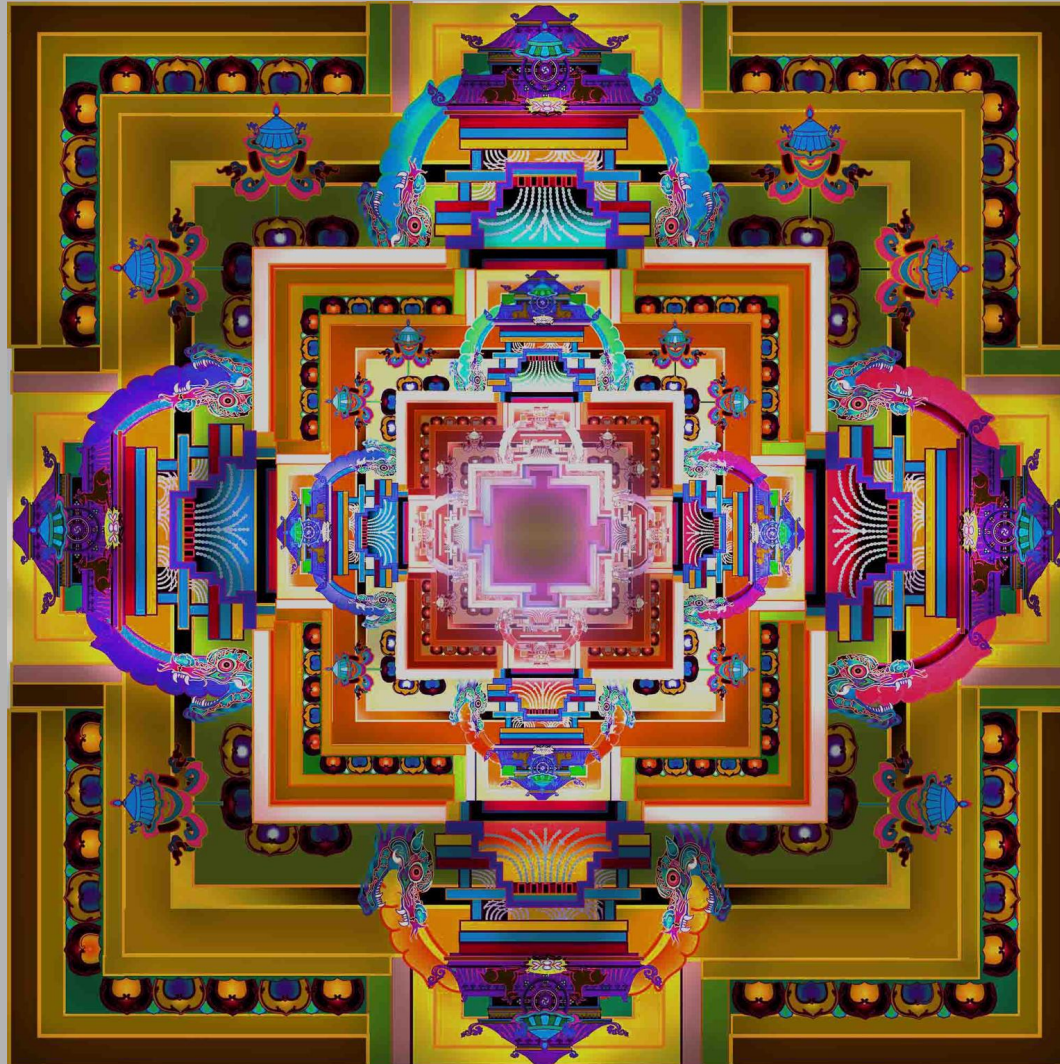
Guru with tiger by V.Vaartnou

- 1) The generation stage, one dissolves the mundane world and visualizes one's chosen deity, its mandala and companion deities
- 2) The completion stage, one dissolves the visualization of and identification with the yidam in the realization of sunyata or emptiness.
- Front generation. The yidam is visualized as being present in the sky facing the practitioner. This approach is considered less advanced, hence safer for the practitioner, and is engaged more for the rites of propitiation and worship.
- Self generation. The yidam is invoked and then merged with the practitioner as an upaya of self-transformation. This is as opposed to the method of front generation. Self generation is considered to be more advanced.
- The completion stage defined as the dissolving of the visualization of a deity corresponds to Mahayoga.
- The "Completion stage with marks" (based on yogic practices such as tummo) corresponds to Anu Yoga.
- The "Completion stage without marks" is the practice of Ati Yoga.



Vaishravana by V.Vaartnou

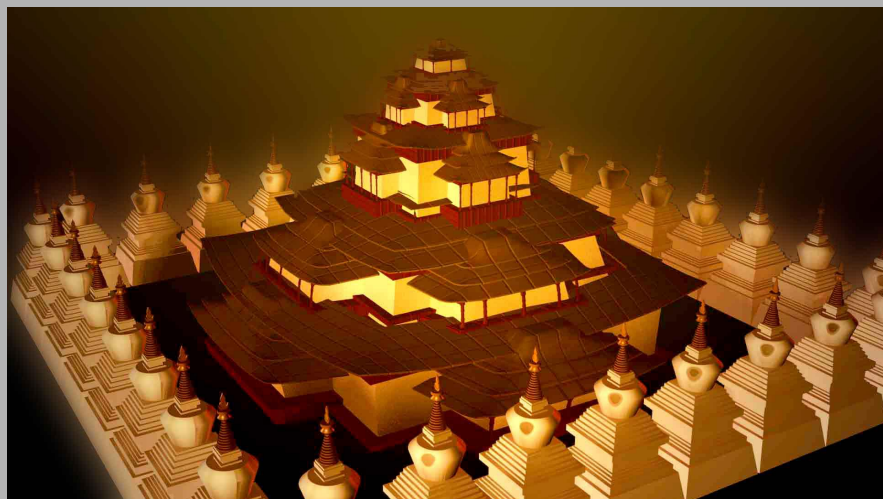
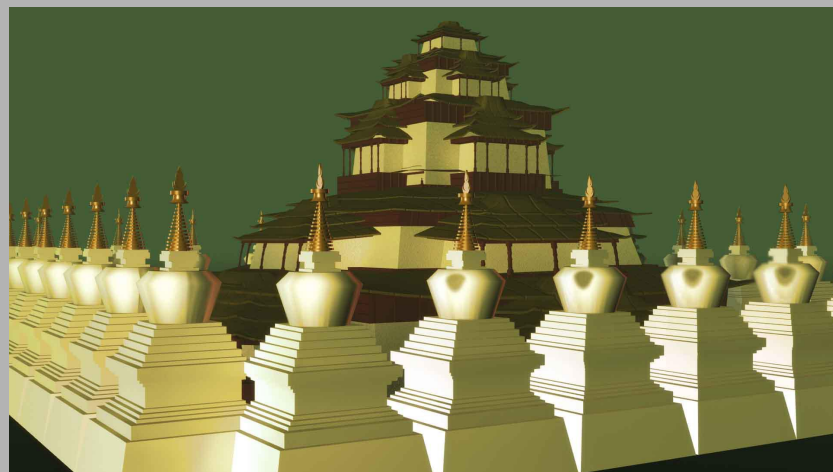
Thank you !

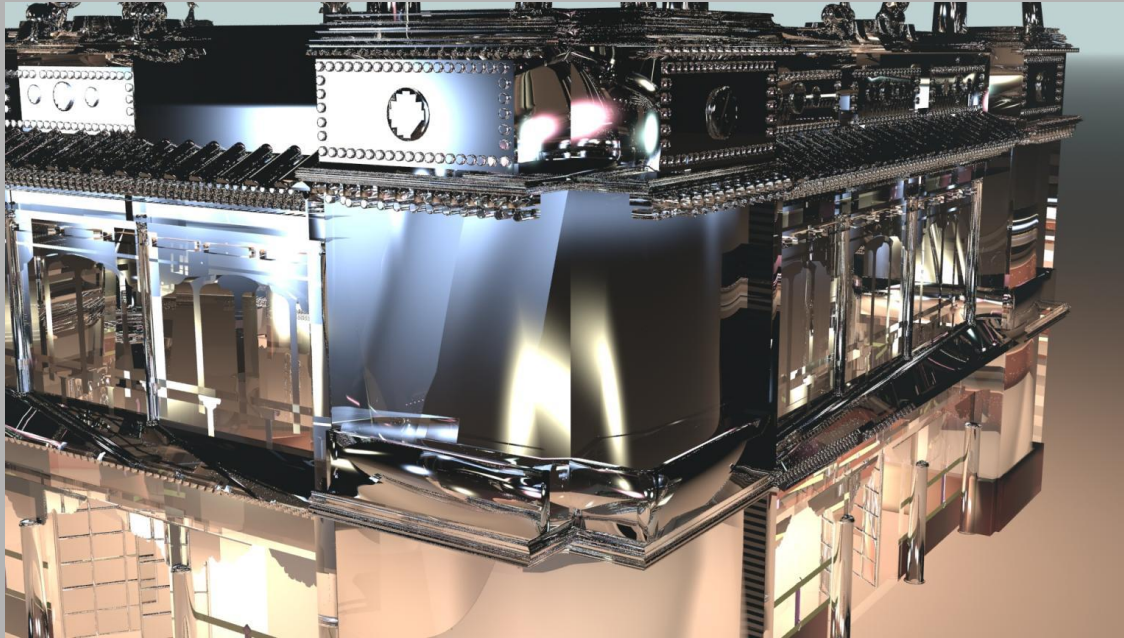


Mandala by V.Vaarnou



3D projects made 15 yrs ago





Glass temple project. V.Vaartnou

