Tshogs zhing: A Wall Painting in the New 'Du khang of Spituk (dPe thub)

Filippo Lunardo

Introduction

Tshogs zhing is a compound consisting of the terms tshogs: ‘assembly’, ‘mass’, ‘group’, or verbs such as ‘to gather’, ‘to collect’, etc.; and zhing, ‘field’ in the sense, for example, of a farmer’s field (Yablonsky 2000:49–50). Within specific instruction and liturgy literatures, both tantric and exoteric, this compound refers to the visualization of gurus conceived as a complex spiritual field. By means of such visualization, the meditator receives from the assembly of masters and deities the blessings, inspiration and transformative energy necessary for the accumulation of spiritual merit and for the destruction of negativity and obstacles, aimed at obtaining the goal set by the instruction that is put into practice.

The Tshogs zhing, basically defined as ‘field of the accumulation of merit’, envisages the visualization of a root guru, the one from whom the lineage or religious order has sprung, as its main figure, considered as fully divine. All around this figure there are the lineage holding masters, and masters associated with specific experiential practices which are in any case related to the lineage. Besides these groups of figures are found different classes of deities, ranging from the main yi dam of the anuttarayogatantra cycle down to the divinities of lesser spiritual level considered to be the protectors of the Buddhist religion in general and in particular of the path of the spiritual practitioner. All the figures of the tshogs zhing, always considered as emanations of the root guru, are visualized as positioned on a wish-fulfilling tree that functions as an axis mundi whose various parts symbolize different experiences of the Buddhist Dharma.1

---

1 In the dGe lugs pa order of Tibetan Buddhism, the literature that describes the visualization of tshogs zhing in relation to tantric instructions is that of the bla ma mchod pa, which is essentially linked to the liturgy that revolves around devotion to the guru. On the other hand the tshogs zhing linked to instructions unrelated to initiations is that which is prescribed especially in lam rim literature, the gradual path to awakening.
The \textit{tshogs zhing} Tradition within the dGe lugs pa Order

Within the dGe lugs pa order there are three traditions relating to the visualization of the field of the accumulation of merit. According to the first, the root \textit{guru} is visualized in the likeness of the Buddha Śākyamuni. In this tradition he represents every type of master and deity, and thus comes to be visualized alone and not surrounded by any other figure.

In the tradition stemming from the \textit{lam rim} tradition the visualization of the field of accumulation of merit is arranged around the figure of the \textit{guru} visualized as the Buddha Śākyamuni, though surrounded by lamas and deities. This type of \textit{tshogs zhing} is called \textit{khrom tshogs}.

In the tradition stemming from tantric and exoteric liturgy and practices connected to the \textit{guru} devotion, that is to say the \textit{bla ma mchod pa} tradition, the \textit{tshogs zhing} has the founder of the dGe lugs pa order itself, Tsong kha pa, as its principal figure. Tsong kha pa appears as an emanation called Bla ma Blo bzang rdo rje 'chang, surrounded by masters and deities. Such type of \textit{tshogs zhing} goes by the name of \textit{mtho brtsegs}.

In the \textit{lam rim} and \textit{bla ma mchod pa} literature, the visualization of the \textit{tshogs zhing} belongs to the so-called preliminary practices, \textit{sngon 'gro}, despite the fact that the meditator continues with them throughout the whole course of his or her practice.

In the \textit{lam rim} tradition the visualization of the field of accumulation of merit belongs to the fourth of six preliminary practices known as \textit{sbyor chos} \footnote{\textit{sbyor ba'i chos drug.}} (Dalai Lama 1991:22, 28–39.), whereas, in the case of the \textit{bla ma mchod pa}, the visualization of the \textit{tshogs zhing} (Panchen Lama 2003:5–9; Dalai Lama 1996:76–111; Pabongka Rinpoche 1997:157–161, 768/769) follows the literature of the taking of refuge, the tantric practice of the practitioner’s self-generation in the form of a \textit{yi dam}, usually two-armed Vajrabhairava, and the blessing of offerings that are considered to be derived from the union of bliss and emptiness.

The Artistic Tradition

Both in relation to \textit{lam rim} instructions and to those of the \textit{bla ma mchod pa}, the iconographic codification of the visualization of the \textit{tshogs zhing} is structured around the wish-fulfilling tree. This functions as the actual vertical axis of the entire image. According to the instructions found in the relevant literature, both the Buddha and Tsong kha pa should be depicted seated at the