

# The Thirteen Dralas of Tibet

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The Dorje Dradül thangka depicts the Vidyādhara, the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, as a warrior king in the manner of Gesar of Ling or the Rigden Kings of Shambhala. The diversity of the figures on the thangka express the special way that the Dorje Dradül combined teachings from many traditions. At the top of the thangka are the three main gurus of the Kagyü and Nyingma traditions who appear in his *Sādhana of the Embodiment of all the Siddhas* (a.k.a. *The Sādhana of Mahāmudrā*). Arranged above the central figures' heads from shoulder to shoulder are dancing ḍākinīs appearing as heavenly musicians known as gandharvas. At the bottom of the thangka are three Buddhist dharmapālas, or protectors. And ranged in a semicircle to his left, right, and below him are thirteen warriors in armor who seem to be emanations of Trungpa Rinpoche because they are outfitted like him. These are the thirteen dralas of Tibet.

When Khyentse Rinpoche and Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche designed the thangka, they put into it figures and motifs that represented the Dorje Dradül's teachings in the West. So, for example, Trungpa Rinpoche's way of combining Nyingma and Kagyü teachings is represented by the guru figures from his most famous sādhana. The protectors ranged at the bottom of the thangka reflect the dharmapālas, both male and female, which he invoked in the protection of his Vajradhatu centers. His Shambhala teachings are represented by the warrior style of the central figure and, of course, by the thirteen dralas. Rinpoche's teachings on the nature of dralas are found in the talks he gave at Kalāpa Assembly when he was giving commentary on the Shambhala termas.

Who are the thirteen dralas? Actually, there are several answers to this question. Trying to figure out who they are exactly is complicated enough to lead you into confusion and bewilderment. Nevertheless, there are some common themes about these figures that can help to give you a sense of what they represent in your own experience when you practice. In reading about them you can let some of the details wash over you and just gain an intuitive sense of what you are inheriting from the lineage.

Dralas, or as we sometimes translate them, war gods, are a class of local deities from the non-Buddhist native religious practice of Tibet. If you ask a Tibetan, he or she might very well say that they are Bön deities, because this is the word that Buddhists informally use for non-Buddhist religion in Tibet. That answer, however, would not be strictly accurate. Bön itself is a formal religion imported into Tibet, perhaps from an ancient kingdom to the West known as Shang Shung. It is a religion with many scriptures, a definable dogma, and a complete system of metaphysics and meditation practice just like Buddhism. It is true that Bön scriptures mention dralas and other local deities a great deal, but it might be more accurate to say, as the Tibetan anthropologist R.A. Stein did, that the real home of belief in dralas is a religion with no name that constitutes the common occult beliefs of all

Tibetans—no matter to what lineage, sect, or system they belong. In fact, Stein called it the “nameless religion.”

One of the characteristic ceremonies of this religion is the lhasang, or smoke purification offering. This is definitely a non-Buddhist ceremony, but it is performed by Buddhists and Bönpos alike, simply because everybody in Tibet believes in the war gods that are invoked by a lhasang and asked to descend down the column of juniper smoke. A lhasang may begin by mentioning Buddhas and bodhisattvas, if it is being chanted by a Kagyüpa or Nyingmapa, for example. But the principal invocations at the heart of the ceremony call upon the dralas, who are the next level down from the enlightened beings. A Bön ceremony might begin with the founders and enlightened beings of Bön. But these are an introduction to the core of a Bön lhasang, which will be invoking a list of more or less the same dralas as a Buddhist one.

Actually, the main deities invoked by this ceremony have as a class a standard technical appellation; they are called the eight classes of deities, the lha degyé. The eight classes are a list of the main groups of non-Buddhist deities every Tibetan believes in, the local deities. The list varies slightly from one tradition to another, but in general it includes the dralas as one of the eight classes. It also includes the lha (deities of the sky), the nyen (mountain gods), and the lu (nāgas or dragons). It also includes strange local classes such as the fascinating one-legged teurang, gods of gamblers who ride around on tornadoes.

Sometimes all the eight classes are simply called dralas, because the name has also come to refer loosely to all native Tibetan gods. But as the name itself indicates, the term drala, when used precisely, denotes deities with a very specific function—practical protection of the individual. When dralas are thought of in this way—that is, as protectors—they are usually represented as armored men and women with weapons riding on horses, armed for our protection, divine bodyguards. This is the general picture one has of a drala. As Walter Scott would have said, “gallant champions, mounted bravely and armed richly.”

When the time comes to describe specific dralas and their exact characteristics, the picture changes. Each drala has its own proper name and a subcategory of war gods into which it falls as well as a specific, unique iconography. We will look at the naming and iconography of dralas later. But first, let us look at the word itself to gain a deeper appreciation of what it means.

## Dralas and Their Groups

Most of what we know about the dralas comes to us from the texts of various lhasang ceremonies and from the Gesar Epic, where, as you will see, they play a role as characters. The list changes dramatically from one source to another, perhaps because there are actually two or three groups of dralas (called brotherhoods) that have thirteen members. Typically the lhasang liturgies give hierarchical lists of the deities being offered to and invited to descend down the column of smoke. Some groups have three members, some nine, some thirteen, some thirty-six.

Lhasangs usually begin by invoking the highest divine principles: buddhas, yidams, great bodhisattvas, and gurus. Next they invoke the local deities—dralas, wermas, and so on—and when they do this we learn about the societies or brotherhoods of dralas. When the term *drala* is used to refer to one of these brotherhoods, it names a class of deities. But the word *drala* is also the proper name of one specific Tibetan god who perches invisibly on the right shoulder of warriors, protecting them against attacks. In fact, this is what the word literally means: “god against enemies.” The word *dra* (dgra) means “enemy.” The word *lha* can have two meanings. When it is spelled *lha*, it means “god”; so in this sense a *dralha* is an “enemy god,” that is, a god who defends against enemies. But *lha* can also be spelled *bla* (meaning “above”). In that case, it is pronounced simply as “la” without the *h* sound, and the meaning of the compound is “above the enemy,” or as it is spoken about in *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, “above any enemy or conflict . . . wisdom beyond aggression.” The presence of the *b* in *bla* and the peculiar accent of some Tibetans makes this often pronounced as “dab-la.”

As the name of a particular spirit, Drala is part of a set of personal energies called “the five patron gods,” as mentioned in the “Invocation for Raising Windhorse.” The five patron gods occupy stations on the body of a warrior and are essential to his or her success in life. They are almost synonymous with one’s windhorse (*lungta*; *rlung rta*) and are sometimes called the “five patron gods of authentic presence.” Authentic presence is a translation for the Tibetan word *wangtang* (*dbang thang*), which literally means the “field of power.” It can be thought of as a globe of invisible light or energy that surrounds a warrior or a saint. Tibetan thangkas represent it in cross section as a rainbow arc above the shoulders. When the five patron deities are fully vested on the body of the warrior, his or her windhorse is raised and the *wangtang* spreads open like an energy field projecting out from the body.

What is the individual character of each of the five patron gods? One list gives them this way:

- crown of the head—yul lha (yul lha; “country god”)
- right shoulder—dra lha (dgra lha; “enemy god”)
- right armpit—po lha (pho lha; “male god”)
- left armpit—mo lha (mo lha; “female god”)
- heart—sok lha (srog lha; “life-force god”)

Yul lha is a very ancient class of deity sometimes associated with hunting. It is translated at times as “god of the chase.” Sometimes it is simply the word for the deity that rules a certain region. The *sok* of sok lha is the famous Tibetan word for “life force.” The life force dwells in the heart of human beings. It is part of a list of three forces which, in native Tibetan lore, are essential to human life—sok, tse (*tshe*), and la, or life force, longevity energy, and soul.

Sok is sometimes called sok marpo (*srog dmar po*), the “red life.” Without it the human body would become inanimate. Tse is an energy which a person receives in a certain amount at birth. When the tse is all used up, a person dies of old age.

La is a complex of energies that is responsible for one's sense of identity. Some scholars, influenced by the Chinese theory of multiple souls, call it a soul. The la can actually wander from a person's body. In that case, one would become depressed, forgetful, and extremely vulnerable to illness. Eventually, a person whose la has wandered will die. Therefore, there are important ceremonies in which you call the la back, even offering a "ransom" for its return. Actually, the famous Kagyü White Tārā practice that is done to extend one's life is called "ransoming for the return of the la."

## Dralas and Trauma

All the energies and deities mentioned above are part of what you could call the Tibetan theory of trauma. When a person receives a sudden shock, it can scare these energies away from the body. If a person is terribly humiliated, the patron gods and perhaps the la itself will abandon the body. The so-called "interrogation techniques" the Americans used at Abu Ghraib prison in early 2004 to "soften up" prisoners would be seen by this tradition as an attempt to strip a person of their life force and protective spirits. There are many famous stories of such goings on. For example, if one wishes to assassinate a king, it is felt that his patron deities, which must be very strong if he is a king, have to be driven away. The ancient Tibetan king Trigum Tsenpo was defeated by his minister Long Ngam after the minister got his dra lha and po lha to leave the king's shoulder and armpit.

In the Gesar epic the young Gesar is attacked by a Bönpo shaman named Anye Gompa Rāja. Anye begins his attack some distance from Gesar's tent by shouting three PHAṬ's. The three shouts are designed to frighten away the protective gods that dwell on and around his body. Being Gesar, he has more than merely the usual collection of patron gods and energies. He has four kindred gods who each command an army of emanational gods. In this passage Gesar is called Joru, the name he kept until he had won the horse race. Joru realizes Gompa Rāja is about to attack and marshals his dralas, led by his four brother and sister dralas, into stones that will be used as weapons. Later in the epic he will acquire his armor and horse. Then these gods will live on his weapons, armor, and parts of his horse's body. These articles and locations will be "supports" (ten; rten) for the dralas, physical objects that they use in order to manifest. Here is the passage where Gompa Rāja mounts his mystical attack.

Joru said, "Mother, the time has come for me to subjugate Anye Gompa Rāja. Could you please bring me four little pebbles?" She put four pebbles in his hand. He put one in front, one in back, and one each to the right and the left. [Then he called] elder brother, White Garuḍa Conch, younger brother Little Light Nāga Serpent, sister Sparkling Radiant Light, and Lord Nyen Gedzo along with the Nine Brethren, the best of war gods. At that time they had not yet united with the actual supports for the war gods: armor, helmet, and weapons (which had not yet been gathered). So the war gods along with their retinue, using the pebbles as the meditative focal point, were brought into them.

Anye Gompa Rāja was coming from his retreat and approaching in three stages. When he shouted PHAṬ the first time, all the gods in the sky disappeared. But elder brother White Garuḍa Conch, surrounded by the 900 conch-armored ones, became

one with the pebble without being harmed. Again, as he moved one stage closer, Anye shouted another PHAṬ and all the nāgas below him disappeared. But younger brother Little Light Nāga Serpent along with his retinue of 900 remained firm. On seeing the tent, Anye shouted PHAṬ again and all the nyen in the middle realm disappeared. However, Gedzo and his retinue of 360 remained firm. At that time Joru focused his mind and called to the gods. Then all the war gods returned like a flurry of snow. There was a blizzard of dharmapālas and wermas like lightning bolts flashing everywhere.

At the moment that the heretic Gompa Rāja arrived at the door, Joru quickly ran, scooping up the four pebbles and threw them. According to Anye's perception, he saw a white man with 900 conch-armored ones, a blue man with 900 turquoise-armored ones, a yellow man with 360 gold-armored ones, and an army of dākinīs 900 strong chasing him. Without looking back he ran away.

As this passage shows, the dralas can take many forms and rest in all sorts of physical objects. When Joru loads them into stones and throws them at Anye, the shaman actually sees the dralas attacking him in their iconographic form. Being a special, supreme being, Gesar has special dralas as well. The four mentioned here act like patron gods, but are more powerful and more specific. They are called brother and sister, because some of them descended from heaven and entered into the womb with him and were born with him. Others were drawn to him by their previous vows and remain around him. Later, when he gains his divine armor from Mount Magyal Pomra where it is buried, and his magical horse from the no-man's-land where it lives at his birth, these gods will rest in these objects. Each of them is accompanied by armies of other dralas who would appear like them. When Anye tried to frighten them away, it worked for some of the many dralas on his body or hovering about, but the most powerful ones remained firm.

Ordinarily the three scary PHAṬ's would have been enough to disarm the victim of Anye's attack. But since it is Gesar, a person of perfect power, dignity, windhorse, and authentic presence, they all return in an instant, reinstalling themselves in such a rush that they form a mass of returning war gods like a flurry of snow.

This is what a warrior would have to do in the world of Tibetan magic. After he had received the shock or trauma, he would focus his mind, raise windhorse, straighten himself psychologically, and call his patron deities back instantly.

In his book on Tibetan protective deities, Nebesky-Wojkowitz describes the iconography of the five patron gods. The mo lha is a beautiful young girl wearing white and blue silk and a jeweled diadem. She rides a white deer and holds a divination arrow and a mirror. Her name is Machik Palgyi Lhamo, Only Mother Glorious Goddess. She emanates goddesses like herself from her body.

Sok lha is represented as a white man with a powerful body, riding a black horse with white hooves. He has a golden helmet and cuirass and wields a lance with white pennants and a snare. His body emanates countless "gods of male beings."

Po lha is a youthful man wearing white and blue silken clothes. He holds a wish-granting gem and a pan full of gems and sends out from his body “thirty-three gods of authentic presence.”

Yul lha, as one would guess, is depicted as a man dressed for the chase, riding a white horse and carrying bow and arrows. He sends out more “country gods, castle gods, birds, sheep, and white yaks.”

It is confusing that all five gods are called dralas and yet one of them has the name Drala. It may be that originally War God was the name of just one Tibetan deity, but gradually it came to be the generic term for all native Tibetan deities who exercise a protective role. As mentioned earlier, the name is sometimes used now to refer to all local deities whether positive or negative. The patron god called Drala is represented as a smiling youthful man dressed in a white cloak, high boots, and a white silk turban. He too carries a lance and a snare and in the lhasangs we know of, he radiates all sorts of Buddhist teachers.

Although details of iconography change greatly from one chant to another and the list changes slightly from lineage to lineage, the general idea is quite clear. Some of the patron gods are dressed as armored warriors, some as hunters, and some as handsome riders. They hold different accouterments and they are accompanied by numbers of associated smaller deities, but they are all quite warlike. They are quite elegant in their appearance and they demand that the warrior, male or female, maintain an elegant appearance as well. That is to say, since they must descend on the human body and occupy different stations on it, they require that the clothes they land on be neat and clean, that the body be clean and well-groomed, and that the mind which attracts them be dignified and uplifted. Conversely, persons who are having trouble with their attitude, who are becoming depressed or have received a trauma, might very well begin by straightening their clothes and fixing their appearance on the theory that it will attract these war gods. When they have descended in response and installed themselves, it will be natural and relatively easy to become psychologically uplifted.

Thus we have in Tibetan lore a complete psychology of how to deal with trauma—a psychology connected with the notion of the dralas and patron gods. Further measures beyond those mentioned in the preceding paragraph would be to raise windhorse directly, if you know how, and to perform lhasangs, windhorse chants, and other ceremonies aimed at drawing these forces and deities back to one’s body-mind complex.

We have discussed thus far five of the gods who are often considered among the thirteen dralas of Tibet. Let us look at other war gods who sometimes find their way to this list. There is a passage in the Gesar epic in which the dralas who adorn Gesar’s body are listed. Here is a section of it:

In order to benefit sentient beings, his body  
Does damage to perverted devils in nine ways:  
So that the fire element cannot harm him  
He has the fire god Red Tiger  
And his emanation, the werma Tigress.

For the water element, there is the wind god of the water element,  
     Turquoise Dragon,  
 And his emanation, the werma Golden Fish.  
 For the wood element, there is the wind god of the wood element,  
 Garuḍa, king of birds,  
 And his emanation, the werma White-Breasted Eagle.  
 For the iron element, the iron wind god Great Lion  
 And his emanation, the werma White Snow Lion.  
 May these protect him when crossing plains of fire or unfordable rivers,  
 Protect him from the king of winds, the tornado,  
 And from the weapons demons wield.  
 May these eight wind gods and wermas  
 Gather to protect the body of the great one.  
 And may the auspiciousness of bliss pervade Jambudvīpa.

Here is the familiar group that we call in Shambhala the “four dignities.” They also appear in Chinese Taoist lore, often associated with windhorse, another Chinese idea. In fact, South Chinese Taoism is probably the origin of the four dignities. We have Chinese texts from the second century A.D. that speak of them with only slight variations. In the epic they are called the “four wind gods,” which is probably short for the “four windhorse gods.” It is interesting to note how in the passage above they are matched with four of the five Chinese elements.

Their four emanations are called “werma emanations.” In general there is little obvious difference between wermas and dralas: their iconography is indistinguishable and, as you can see here, their functions are the same as those of the war gods. Originally the wermas were gods of the tips of arrows, which probably means that they rode on these weapons when they were fired to make sure that the arrows struck home.

What follows the list of Gesar’s body gods is a very interesting brotherhood of nine wermas:

The werma who protects from harm of noxious poisons,  
 Yellow coiled friend golden Snake;  
 The food god blue Wolf;  
 And the white Hawk who speeds ahead;  
 The gods who day and night clarify darkness—  
 Shepherd of the day, white Vulture,  
 And shepherd of the night, yellow Owl;  
 The little white Rabbit who keeps the mind clear;  
 The white Grizzly who gives the warrior courage;  
 And the healing werma, dark red Musk Deer.  
 The werma whose windhorse power  
 Foils devil lassos, white muzzled Kiang—  
 These nine wermas protect him from  
 Poison, black magic, and binding lassos.  
 May they gather to the body of the great one,  
 And may the auspiciousness of bliss pervade Jambudvīpa.

Thangkas of Gesar show these animals dwelling in Gesar's aura, which forms a brilliant circle of light around his body: Snake, Wolf, Hawk, Vulture, Owl, Rabbit, Grizzly, Musk Deer, and the magnificent blue Kiang, the wild ass of the Tibetan highlands. These are dralas who have the form of animals instead of armored or robed warriors. They are also examples of very specific kinds of spirits. For example, the blue wolf is a "food god" (se lha; zas lha). It has the power to "turn food into medicine." The owl is a "road god" (lam lha). It protects army scouts and it protects travelers from bad roads and dangerous defiles. It is also called "the shepherd of the night" because it protects nighttime travelers.

According to Zenkar Rinpoche, a Khyentse tülku and author of a Gesar dictionary, the list of the thirteen dralas constitutes these nine animal deities and the four dignities. In the song, they are called "wermas," but as noted above, the precise distinction between the two classes of deities is in general vague.

There is another list of thirteen dralas that will give another example of how Tibetans regard this class. It is drawn from a collection of Kagyü lhasangs.

1. *Noble Man Rock God* (skyes bu brag lha). A white man wearing conch armor, holding a victory banner, riding a garuḍa.
2. *War God Goddess Nurse* (dgra lha ma lha bu rdzi). A golden woman holding a spindle and thread, goddess of maternity.
3. *War God Hearth God Turquoise Lady* (dgra lha than lha g.yu mo). A goddess of the hearth who dwells in the three stones that support the cooking pot. She oversees melting butter over the fire, an important activity in the Tibetan household. She wears clothes of white silk.
4. *War God House God Throat Drink* (dgra lha kyim lha ske thung). May be a goddess. Holds a conch shell pillar in her hand. She protects the house and keeps the pillars from falling.
5. *War God Vaishravaṇa*. One of the two great Hindu gods of wealth.
6. *Wealth God Ārya Jambhala* (nor lha ārya jambhala). The other classical Indian god of wealth. The Tibetan Buddhists have many rituals for him and Vaishravaṇa. He is a fat, golden man holding a mongoose vomiting jewels.
7. *Commerce God Lord of the Feast Elephant Trunk, Gaṇeśha* (tsong lha tsogs bdag glang sna). Gaṇeśha is one of the most popular of Hindu deities. He is a baby with the head of an elephant. His name is formed from the words *gaṇa*, meaning "assembly," and *īśha*, meaning "lord." He is also popular as a local deity in Tibetan tantra. In the tradition of native Tibetan religion, he is a leader of war god troops.
- 8.–13. *Six Protectors* (mgon po):
  - Banquet god (mgron lha)
  - Road god (lam lha)
  - Bandit god (jag lha)

War god (dgra lha)  
Food god (zas lha)  
Life-force god (srog lha)

Vaishravaṇa, Jambhala, and Gaṇesha are Hindu gods who have entered into the native Tibetan religion, perhaps by way of the Indian tantras. They have a very different feel from the first four gods in this list, whose very names make them sound non-Indic and very Tibetan. Another list gives the functions of these gods:

1. Rock god guards the person.
2. Mother god guards the family.
3. Hearth god guards one's herds and wealth.
4. House god guards the home.
5. Vaishravaṇa guards gold and silver.
6. Jambhala guards one's jewels.
7. Commerce god insures great profits.
8. Banquet god guards banquets.
9. Road god rescues from ledges and rivers.
10. Bandit god destroys the wealth of enemies.
11. War god subdues enemies.
12. Food god turns food into medicine.
13. Life-force god protects life force.

One more list is relevant. There is a second list of five patron gods:

1. Hearth god (thabs lha) provides nourishing and tasty food.
2. Storeroom god (bang lha) increases food and property.
3. Happiness god (dge lha) provides good harvest.
4. Pillar god (ka lha) brings good luck and prosperity.
5. Door god (sgo lha) increases wealth.

Returning now to the thangka, we can see why the thirteen dralas are represented generically there. They actually represent a wide variety of gods and energies that attach to the practitioner's body or who should be present in the home and life of a conscious individual. In the thangka, however, they are shown as if they are emanations of the Dorje Dradül and all look like him. This is appropriate, because he was the Tibetan lama who had the courage to invite them to the West, despite the fact that they do not figure in the Buddhist scriptures.

The bringing of protective deities to a foreign land is an interesting idea and one that is seen in Western classics. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the progenitor of Rome brings his local family deities from Asia to Italy. The *Aeneid* is about the fate of the Trojans after their homeland has been sacked by Greek invaders. Aeneas, a Trojan aristocrat, escapes from burning Troy with a small group of families. He carries his aging father on his back and he carries in his hands statues of the "dralas" of his family, which are called the *lares* and *penates*. He also brings along with him the huge, terrifying, and magnificent goddess of Mount Ida, Cybele, who overlooks Troy. This wrathful goddess is installed in the center of the city of Rome when it is built by the descendants of Aeneas.

The noble families of Rome practiced in their homes offerings to the lares, penates, and another class of family deities called the *numina*. All of these are supposedly Trojan family deities, dralas brought from the destroyed homeland, who embody the inner power and strength of the Roman state. Some of these are called *genii* (“geniuses”) of the family, but not because they are intelligent, which is a modern meaning of the word “genius.” Originally, it was a word for a ruling deity of the family, the drala who lived from generation to generation as the family, tribe, or community’s essence.

This, perhaps, is what the thirteen dralas mean to us, and it is the reason they figure so powerfully on the Dorje Dradül thangka. They are the inner genius of Tibetan civilization, the secret essence of the power of their daily lives. Like Aeneas, the Dorje Dradül has brought them to Western shores now, so that their essence of life force, dignity, and practical energy for engaging the world may be passed on to us as we build an enlightened society.

Two major sources for this article are my translation of the *Gesar of Ling Epic* and a book on local Tibetan deities written by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. Many of the lists involve direct quotations from this book. I have also used lists from the *bod rgya shan sbyar gyi ge sar tshig bdzod*, which is a Tibetan-Chinese dictionary of names from the Gesar epic written by a group under the direction of Thubten Nyima, Zenkar Rinpoche.