

GAṆAPATI IN THE BUDDHIST ART OF TIBET AND MONGOLIA

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Introduction:

In the course of history Pan-Indian culture had a great impact on many countries in Asia due to commercial and cultural contacts where many gods and goddesses of the Brahmanical pantheon were submitted to a process of transculturation, such as the elephant headed god Gaṇeśa or Gaṇapati, venerated by traders and merchants all over India and the neighboring countries from the 10th century onwards, when the formation of trade guilds and money exchange developed.¹ The title Gaṇapati appears first in the *Ṛg Veda*, composed around 1500 BC. *Gaṇa* means ‘flock’, ‘troop’ referring to classes of inferior deities or demi-gods considered as Śiva’s attendants under the leadership (*pati*) of Gaṇeśa, although the title Gaṇeśa is not found in Vedic literature or in the *Mahābharata*. It appears only in the Puraṇic texts which started being written around 500 AD. Both titles are equivalent. In the Jain as well as the Buddhist traditions Gaṇapati appears in the form of Vināyaka from the Late Gupta period onwards (**Plate 22.1**). In the 10th century the Gaṇapati cult also spread to Burma where he is known as Mahapienne (Skr. Mahānināyaka) and other parts of South-east Asia (Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand). Although without much significance in China Gaṇapati did appeal to the followers of the Shingon School in Japan where he is known as Ganabachi (Gaṇeśa) or Binyaka-ten (Vināyaka) bringing happiness and bliss by removing obstacles (**Plate 22.2**). In Nepal a unique feature is the worship of the Tantrik Gaṇeśa known as Heramba and celebrated by Hindus and Buddhists alike (**Plate 22.3**).²

Gaṇapati in Indian and Nepali Buddhist Art:

As it was correctly pointed out by Gouriswar Bhattacharya,³ in the Buddhist Art of the Subcontinent Gaṇapati has a dual role; he is worshipped as the remover of obstacles (*vighna harta*), but also as the creator of obstacles (*vighna karta*). This dual role is more prevalent in the art of Nepal, where Buddhism and Śaivasim have coexisted for a long time. Bhattacharya has identified the earliest specimen of an elephant headed figure in Buddhist Art in Sri Lanka on a frieze of a Buddhist Stupa near Mihintale ascribed to the first century AD.⁴ In the ruins of Paharpur in Bangladesh (8th century) a four-armed Gaṇapati holding a Mālā, a radish, a trident and another unidentified object was found (**Plate 22.4**).

A metal image also of the four-armed Gaṇapati belonging to the 8th/9th century was found in Halud Vihar, Rajshahi district, holding a trident, a Śaiva attribute which is rarely held by a Hindu Gaṇeśa. A unique example of Gaṇeśa is found at Sarnath on an arch illustrating the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha.

In Buddhist *vihāras* of Nepal the vestibules are guarded by images of Gaṇapati at the left and Mahākāla on the right. The dancing form of Gaṇapati called Nṛtya Viṇāyaka is particularly popular. On the palace square in Patan a polychrome ten armed Gaṇapati called Heramba mounted on a lion and stepping on a rat is in company of his spouse (**Plate 22.5**).

Another aspect of the elephant headed Gaṇapati in Buddhist art and ritual is his personification as the creator of obstacles. In Vajrayāna four deities mainly are depicted to trample on Gaṇapati; these are Parnaśabarī (**Plate 22.6**), Aparajita (**Plate 22.7**), Vighnāntaka (**Plate 22.8**) and Mahākāla.

Gaṇapati as the elephant demon is trampled under the feet of Mahākāla as he is the creator of obstacles (**Plate 22.9**).

Gaṇapati Sādhana and ritual texts contained in the Tibetan Canon:

The Tibetan canon (*bka'* 'gyur and *bstan* 'gyur) contains eighteen texts on various aspects of Gaṇapati, peaceful, wrathful as well as Tantrik forms, consisting of Sādhana, hymns of Praise, averting rituals, offering rites such as Homa and *gTor ma* as listed below, written by Indian Pandits such as Dharmakīrti, Śrī Dīpamkara Atīśa, Candrakīrti, and Mahāsiddhas such as Avadhūtapāda and Kṛṣṇapāda. Some of these texts have been partly studied focusing on iconographic details (Jeff Watts)⁵ or on the special erotic forms of Gaṇapati (Gudrun Buehneemann).⁶ Apart from some excerpts none of these texts have ever been completely translated and published.⁷

Collections of Tibetan and Mongolian Icons of Gaṇapati:

- a) In the Mongolian pictorial block print collection of 500 icons commissioned in 1810 called 'Icons Worthwhile to See' (*Bris sku mthong ba don ldan*)⁸ we find Rinjung Gyatsa (*Rin 'byung rGya tsa*) paintings with transcriptions and translations of their caption in Tibetan and Mongolian as well as their short Sādhana compiled originally by Tāranātha (1575-1634). There are six different forms of Gaṇapati listed in the *Rin 'byung* (No. 12, 271, 334, 335, 336, 339b; Vol. II, fol. 188a), as well as three-headed form in *yabyum* called '*Zur 'gegs sel ba'i tshogs bdag chags pa rdo rje* (*Rin 'byung*, Vol. II. Fol. 185a).
- b) The online Himalayan Art Resources (HAR) Archive of The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation⁹ and the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, contain a number of images of paintings and sculptures from Tibet and Mongolia depicting Gaṇapati in various aspects. They are annotated by Jeff Watt (updated 2011) with iconographical descriptions and some excerpts of Sādhana translations (**Plate 22.10**).
- c) In the Bogd Khaan Palace Museum in Ulaan Bataar there is a painting of a red six-armed Gaṇapati preserved. So far I did not come across other Gaṇapati images in monasteries of Tibet or the Himālayan belt, with the exception of one painting recently discovered in Rumtek Monastery, Sikkim.



Lord Ganesha

Plate 22.1: In Jainism Gaṇapati is the deity of good fortune, new ventures and wisdom.



Plate 22.2: In Japan Gaṇapati is called Ganabachi (Kangiten, Shoten). There are over 250 temples of Ganabachi in Japan. This stone sculpture is at the entrance gate of Fukuoka Tower, Japan.



Plate 22.3: Heramba is a five-headed iconographical form of Gaṇapati particularly popular in Nepal and important in tantrik rituals. Folio from the *Sritottvanidhi* (19th century).



Plate 22.4: Gaṇapati, Paharpur, Bangladesh, 8th century, Photo: Gouresvar Bhattacharya.



Plate 22.5: Hermaba, Patan, Nepal, 7th century, Photo: T.O. Ballinger.



Plate 22.6: Aparajita
Photo: S. Kapoor.



Plate 22.7: Parnasabari
Dhaka, 11th century
Courtesy: National Museum.



Plate 22.8: Vignantaka Bihar, 11th century,
Courtesy: County Museum of Art



Plate 22.9: Gajapati as the elephant demon Nepal,
18th cent. Private Coll., Photo: Sotheby's, N.Y.



Plate 22.10: Thanka, Tibet, Gelug Tradition, HAR
Archive.



Plate 22.11: *mGon ser blo 'phel*, the six-armed wealth-guarding and intelligence increasing yellow Mahākāla, listed in the Tibeto-Mongolian Icon collection *Rinjung Gyatsa*, No. 344.



Plate 22.12: *mGon dmar dbang gi rgyal po*, the red Mahākāla Mighty King, listed in the Tibeto-Mongolian Icon collection *Rinjung Gyatsa*, No. 345.



Plate 22.13: Wrathful *Aparājītā* dancing on *Vināyaka*. Tibeto-Mongolian Icon collection *Rinjung Gyatsa*, No. 264.



Plate 22.14: Peaceful *Gaṇapati* with four arms, white in colour (*Tshogs bdag dkar po phyag bzhi pa jo bo'i lugs*), promoted by *Atīṣa* in Tibet, Tibeto-Mongolian Icon collection *Rinjung Gyatsa*, Nr. 335.

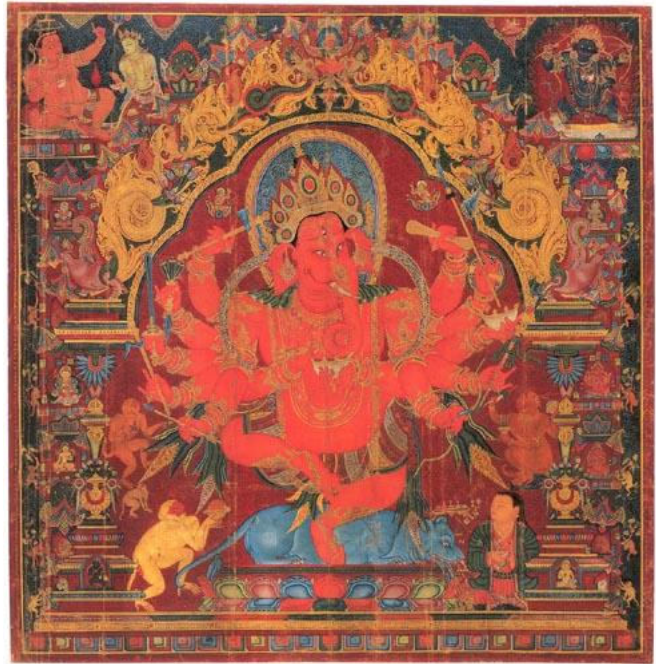


Plate 22.15: Thangka, Tibet 16th century, HAR Archive, No. 989, New York.



Plate 22.16: Gaṇapati Ājñā-vinivarta, Rinjung Gyatsa, No. 334.



Plate 22.17: Thangka, Tibet 19th century, HAR Archive, No. 207, New York.



Plate 22.18: Left: Gaṇapati, Mongolia, 19th century; Right: Sita Gaṇapati, Mongolia, 19th century, Both are miniature paintings on paper or canvas called *Tsagli*.

The Role and Symbolism of Gaṇapati in the Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist Traditions

a. Gaṇapati as malevolent demon:

In Tibet and Mongolia Gaṇapati takes various forms and designations (**Plate 22.18**). He appears as a malevolent demon under the name of Vināyaka, on which the six-armed Wisdom Protector Mahākāla tramples on his corpse, expressing his *lokattara* supremacy over a worldly (*laukika*) – and moreover alien and thus evil– god.¹⁰ In the Rinjung Gyatsa we find five different forms of Mahākāla trampling on Gaṇapati, namely Mahākāla, the Remover of Obstacles (*mGon po bar chad kun gsal*, No. 341); the White Mahākāla of the Wish-Granting Gem (*mGon dkar yod bzhin nor bu*, No. 343) who tramples on two Gaṇapatīs holding a radish and a mongoose, thrown upside down; the Intelligence increasing Yellow Mahākāla (*mGon ser blo 'phel*, Nr. 344) (**Plate 22.11**) trampling on a male and female Gaṇapati; the Red Mahākāla Mighty King (*mGon dmar dbang gi rgyal po*, Nr. 345) (**Plate 22.12**) trampling on Gaṇapati thrown upside down: and the Green Mahākāla, Master of Long Life (*mGon ljang tshe bdag*, Nr. 347).

In the respective Sādhana texts Gaṇapati is generally referred to as “the king of hindering demons”. This ambiguity is reflected in his other name Vināyaka, which means in this context ‘leader-astray’ or ‘mis-leader *log 'dren pa* and thus considered as an obstacle creating demon or also called lord of obstacles.¹¹ In iconography this demoniac form of Gaṇapati is usually



Plate 22.19: Phags pa (1235-1280).

presented in white colour, holding various implements like skull cup, radish or mongoose. As Vināyaka he is also danced upon by the wrathful Aparājita (*gZhan gyis mi thub ma*, No. 264) (**Plate 22.13**) with her right foot,¹² by Parnaśabarī and Vighnantaka.

b. Gaṇapati as a remover of obstacles:

King of gods, subduing *asuras*, Ruling over all hindering demons, perfectly white like a snowy mountain, Gaṇeśa, splendidly shine: I praise you! (Hym of praise, Gaṇapati Sādhana in the tradition of Atīśa),¹³

As the remover of obstacles Gaṇapati or Vināyaka he may also be worshipped as a deity.

As an emanation of Avalokiteśvara¹⁴ he takes benevolent forms. In the Rinjung are listed the Great Red Gaṇapati (*Tshog bdag dmar chen*, No. 12), Yellow Gaṇapati (*Tshogs bdag ser po*, No. 271). A peaceful

Gaṇapati was promoted by Atīśa (*Tshogs bdag dkar po phyag bzhi pa jo bo 'i lugs*, Nr. 335) (**Plate 22.14**) which is white in colour, riding a rat, and holding a radish, a rosary, an ichneumon and a battle axe for cutting the root of illusion (*māyā*).

There is also listed a red, four-armed Gaṇapati (*Tshog bdag dmar po phyag bzhi pa*, Nr. 336).

In the entourage of the Buddhist God of Wealth Vaiśravaṇa (*rNsam thos sras*) also called Kubera and Jambhala (*Rin 'byung*, Vol. II 185ff) three different aspects of Gaṇapati (tib. *Tshogs bdag*) are listed. He figures also in the entourage of the servant Kundhali (*Khol po Kundha li*, Nr. 339) as well as in the Maṇḍalas of Dharmadhātu-vāgiśvara, Durgatipariśodhana as Vajravīnāyaka,¹⁵ Bhūtadāmara, and Kālacakra, where Gaṇapati as a subordinate divinity is assembled peripherally round the main deity.¹⁶ Gaṇapati further appears among the group of *dgra lha*, 'enemy gods', protecting practitioners against enemies and helping them to increase their property. In a *lha bsangs* text of the *bKa' rgyud pa* order listed under the seventh group of *dgra lha* (*Tshong lha tshogs bdag glang sna*) as the Tibetan name implies Gaṇeśa in the position of a "god of trade" (*tshong lha*) who is white in colour and has an elephant's head with three eyes, holding a stick adorned with a gem and in the left hand a mongoose.¹⁷

In all Tibetan Buddhist traditions, particularly in the Sakyapa and Shangpa Kagyu School, but also as a revealed “treasure” (*gter ma*) in the Nyingmapa tradition Gaṇapati appears as a Tantrik deity based on transmissions derived from various Indian Mahāsiddhas. According to the Kagyupa tradition Yogi Milarepa (11th century) is believed to have been fed by Gaṇapati while he was in retreat at Lapchi on at least two occasions, and that Gaṇapati was his first student.

The Great Red Lord of Hosts Mahārakta is a Tantrik form of Gaṇapati related to the Cakrasamvara Cycle of Tantras (**Plate 22.15**). In the Mahārakta tradition the narrative relates how Avalokiteśvara after killing the Śaiva Hindu Gaṇeśa proceeded to cut off the elephant head and then placed it on top of his own, thus taking on the appearance of the defeated ‘evil’ Gaṇeśa.

“The elephant-headed god of wealth, Ganapati, appeared to the Siddha Zangtsa Sonam Gyaltzen, during his meditation and carried him up to the highest peak of worldly existence. Looking out eastward from this vantage-point, Zangtsa saw the kingdoms of Tibet, China and Mongolia stretching out into the distance below him, but the great expanses beyond them so unnerved him that he dared not look further. The deity informed him, “Because you dared not look further, dominion over these lands which you have seen will belong, not to you, but to your descendants. Had you looked further, you would have become the ruler of the universe. “In order to fulfill his prophecy, Gaṇapati approached an elderly sage living in solitude at gLang dor. This great hermit, Se ston Ripa, was a pillar of the Kadampa order, a writer of many books and an emanation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The deity requested him to take rebirth in Sakya as the son of Zangtsa Sonam, and Se-ston Ripa agreed”.¹⁸

Another form of Gaṇapati Mahārakta, twelve-armed, of red colour with a white head belongs to a set of three red powerful deities of the “Thirteen Golden Dharmas” of the Sakya (**Plate 22.10**). The other two are Kurukulla of the Hevajratantra and Takkiraja of the Guhyasamāja Tantra. It is described thus:

“...beside a lapis lazuli rock mountain is a red lotus with eight petals, in the middle a blue rat expelling various jewels, Gaṇapati with a body red in colour, having an elephant face with sharp white tusks and possessing three eyes, black hair tied in a topknot with a wish fulfilling gem and a red silk ribbon all in a bundle on the crown of the head. With twelve hands, the six right hands hold an axe, arrow, hook, vajra sword and spear. The six left hold a pestle, bow, khatvanga and a skull cup as well as a shield with a spear and banner. The peaceful right and left hands are signified by the vajra and skull cup filled with blood held to the heart. The remaining hands are displayed in a threatening manner. Wearing various silks as a lower garment and adorned with a variety of jewel ornaments, the left foot is extended in a dancing manner, standing in the middle of the bright rays of red flickering light”.¹⁹

An unusual erotic aspect of Gaṇapati also listed in the Rinjung Gyatsa under the name. The six-armed white Authority-averting Gaṇapati (*Ājñā-vinivarta* (*Jur ‘gegs sel ba’i tshog bdag*, No. 334) depicts the god in white colour and three heads; the principal face is an

elephant's, his right a cat's and his left a monkey's. His three hands hold a radish, a gem and a sword; his left hands hold a sweet meat, a vessel of liquor, and an axe. He is naked with jewel ornaments and a sacred thread of lotuses (**Plate 22.16**).

He has four legs. Two legs are standing with one leg outstretched. The other two are cross-legged (*paryāṅka*). Beneath is his consort, white with a reddish tint in the form of a monkey, also naked and adorned with jewels. With her two hands she is holding on to the feet of Gaṇapati and with her mouth his secret *vajra*. She is supported by a messenger and a female attendant in the form of monkeys.

Another erotic four-headed red Gaṇapati is based as the previous one on a revealed treasure text (*gter ma*) of the Nyingmapa Tradition and based on the Atīśa practice known as Rāgavajra Gaṇapati (**Plate 22.17**). Red in colour with a white elephant head and four hands, he holds a plate of Indian sweets, a white radish, a Mālā and a hook. The heels of the feet are supported by the hands of his consort in the form of a blue monkey-headed Goddess, standing on two small goddesses. She is sucking his *liṅgam*, while her menstruating blood is collected in a skull bowl. Her four monkey attendants, all two-faced, are holding respectively rope, hook, chain and bell, and in their left hands bow and lasso, are depicted standing and emitting menstrual blood.²⁰ They represent depictions of two Sādhana texts in the Tibetan canon as translations of lost Sanskrit texts. Both are associated with Atīśa as translator and compiler.²¹ Gaṇapati seems to be the only deity undergoing fellatio and as such does not derive from Hindu Tantrik forms.

There have been in my opinion misleading speculations in regard to these erotic and highly controversial aspects of Gaṇapati which have also become popular in Japan. Accordingly, due to his origin as a Yakṣa Gaṇeśa is associated with the concept of fertility. But he also seems to personify sexual pleasure and not procreation. His elephant nature should emphasize him as an enjoyer (*bhogin*) of worldly pleasure, a prototype of virility, suitable for a son of Śiva represented in form of a *liṅgam*, thus being wild and without inhibitions.²²

However, I suggest, that as Tantrik and therefore esoteric forms of Gaṇapati the symbolism is somewhat deeper. As for the unusual implement of a white radish which many of the benevolent, non-erotic aspects of Gaṇapati hold, they have been also misinterpreted by another renowned scholar as a symbol of his fondness for food.²³

I opine, in view of the Tantrik context these images are based on, the radish (*mūla*) is a symbol for the Mūladhāracakra at the root of the central psychic channel Suṣumna (tib. *sBu ma*) which is the resting place of Kuṇḍalinī or Caṇḍalī (tib. *gtum mo*) in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the stimulant of smell below the genitals.²⁴ The act of fellatio symbolizes the activation of the Mūladhāracakra. As such Gaṇapati under this aspect is to be understood as the protector of the “secret” Mūladhāracakra, situated in the genitals called also the “secret cakra” in Tibetan (*gsang ba'i 'khor lo*). The menstrual blood refers to the particular circumstances under which these practices are best executed according to the Tantrik secret instructions (*upadeśa*).

Conclusion:

The Gaṇapati (tib. *Tshogs kyi bdag po*, mong. *Coyday*) cult spread along with Buddhism via Tibet into Mongolia where images of Gaṇeśa have been found in bronze, on paper and murals (**Plate 22.18**).

He plays an important role in the Tibetan Sakyapa School. According to the hagiography of Phags pa (1235-1280), the fifth founder of the Sakyapa tradition, Gaṇeśa appeared to his father, Sangtsa Sonam Gyaltsen, a great practitioner who concentrated on Gaṇapati practice, and lifted him with his trunk to Mount Meru showing him the three provinces of Tibet below his descendants will reign over. Later on his son Phagpa conferred the transmission of Gaṇapati to the Mongolian ruler Kublai Khan (1215-1294)²⁵ who spread the cult there (**Plate 22.19**).

In its esoteric Tantrik form the Buddhist Gaṇapati cult in Tibet, Mongolia and also Japan has taken a special aspect, being a historically noted bequest of Indian Mahāsiddhas and Panditas, as a successful syncretism of Buddhism with Brahmanism.

Notes and References:

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4. See in Getty, A.: *Ganesa: A Monograph of an Elephant faced God*. New Delhi, 1971, pl. 22.
5. The Himalayan Art Resources (HAR) Archive of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation (www.himlayanart.org), New York, updated 2011.
6. "Erotic Forms of Gaṇeśa in Hindu and Buddhist Iconography". In: *Script and Image. Papers of Art and Epigraphy. Papers of the 12th world Sanskrit Conference*, edited by Adalbert. J., Gail, Gerd Mevissen, Richard Salomon, Delhi 2006: 15-28.

7. I have submitted this topic on the recommendation of Prof. Lokesh Chandra as a research proposal first to IGNCA, New Delhi, and second to the Asiatic Society, Kolkata. Both proposals were rejected due to financial constraint.
8. Published as “Deities of Tibetan Pantheon”. The Zuerich Paintings of the *Icons Worthwhile to See* (*Bris sku mthong ba don ldan*) edited by Martin Willson and Martin Brauen, Boston 2000.
9. www.himalayanart.org
10. S. Ruegg, David Seyfard: “The Symbiosis of Buddhism with Brahmanism in South-Asia and of Buddhism with ‘local cults’ in Tibet and the Himalayan Region”. Austrian Academy of Sciences. Contributions to the Cultural and Human History of Asia No. 58, Vienna 2008; see also its “Review” in Loseries, Andrea: “Tantrik Literature & Culture. Hermeneutics & Expositions”. Proceedings of the 6th International Csoma de koros Symposium, Kolkata/Santiniketan March 2009. Selected Papers et al. Delhi 2013: 54- 57. And Loseries, Andrea: *On the Synchrony of Mundane vs. Transmundane in Tantrik Iconography: Hari Hari Hari Vahana*, in: Haque, Enamul (Ed.): *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vols. 13 & 14, ICSBA, Dhaka, 2008-2009: 41-46.
11. See Ruegg 2008: 25; and the Glossary in Rinjung Gyatsa 2000: 461.
12. *Sādhanamālā* No. 204.
13. In Rinjung Gyatsa 2000: 334.
14. As for Gaṇapati’s origins in Rudra/Śiva see Renou, L.: Les origines vediques de Gaṇeśa, JA 1937: 271-274.
15. On the Mandalas of Dharmadhātuvāgiśvara, Durgatipariśodhana see Loseries, Andrea: Diamond Spheres– The Keys for Omniscience, in: *Krist, Gabriela: Nako. Research and Conservation in the Western Himalayas*. Vienna 2016:134-139.
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21. See list of texts in the Tibetan canon above.
22. See in detail: Buehmann, Gudrun: Erotic Forms of Gaṇeśa in Hindu and Buddhist Iconography. In: *Script an Image*. Papers on Art and Epigraphy, edited by Adalbert J. Gail, Gerd Mevissen, Richard Salomon, Delhi, 2006: 15-28.
23. Schumann, Hans Wolfgang: *Buddhistische Bilderwelt*. Koeln 1986:199.
24. See Kar, Minati: Kuṇḍalinī Yoga and the Concept of Devī in Śankāracārya’s Saundaryalaharī. In: Loseries, Andrea (Ed.): *Tantrik Literatue and Culture*. Hermeneutics and Expositions. Delhi, 2013: 39-40.
25. *A Gift of Dharma to Kublai Khan* By Chogyal Phagpa, Seventh Patriarch of Sakya. Ngorchen Konchog Lhundup, Ngor chos 'byung, folia 323-328. Translated by Jared Rhoton, 1976.