

# Buddhist Thangkas

*by Ashal Man Lama*

Ashal Man Lama was born March 5, 1972 in Majhipheda, a village in the Kavrepalanchok district of Nepal. His parents and ancestors are Buddhist. His father is a Buddhist Lama (a teacher of Buddhism) and also a thangka painter. His parents provide for their essential needs working as farmers. He has five sisters and two brothers.

When he was 21 years old Ashal began learning the art of thangka painting from his brother-in-law and a friend who is also a Buddhist Lama. This education began in Pokhara, a community in central Nepal where there are clear views of the Dhaulagiri, Annapurna and Manaslu ranges of the Himalayas.

Originally, thangka paintings became popular among traveling monks because the scroll paintings were easily rolled and transported from monastery to monastery. These thangkas served as important teaching tools depicting the life of the Buddha, various influential lamas and other deities and Bodhisattvas (Bodhisattvas are motivated by the wish to benefit other beings and to lead them to enlightenment).

While some regard these as colorful wall hangings, to Buddhists, these Tibetan religious paintings offer a beauty believed to be a manifestation of the divine, and are thus more than visually stimulating. Thangkas are used as a meditation tool to help bring one further down the path to enlightenment.

Because thangkas are important element of Tibetan Buddhist spirituality, it is essential that the proper prayers and mantras be said as part of the painting process. Ashal is a faithful Buddhist and is dedicated to painting thangkas in what he calls, "the right way." This means that he takes time to say the proper prayers and mantras.

For him the painting is a meditative experience. The quality of Ashal's thangkas stands out from many others, though he would never say this. The purpose of a thangka is to draw one's attention to Buddha and his teachings. You will never see an authentic thangka that bears the painter's name or signature as part of the painting, unlike most western paintings. This would be considered boastful of the artist. Buddhists are not to draw attention to themselves, instead to Buddha and his teachings so that all others might find an end to their suffering.

Because of the intricate detail of these thangkas, they require a great deal of time to paint. If you look closely, you will see some of the fine detail that has been done using one animal hair as a paintbrush. Thangkas of the quality seen in this exhibit can take 1 – 5

months to paint. A thangka painter can only paint 5 – 6 hours a day because the minute details require such great eye concentration. Many thangka painters become legally blind after 20 – 25 years of painting.

Ashal shares a shop with 2 others painters in Thamel, an area in Kathmandu just a few blocks west of the National Palace. Ashal also helps other painters who are not able to afford sales space sell their thangkas. There are thangkas both painted by Ashal and by others in the exhibition. As stated before, we do not know the painter of each individual thangka because the importance on the thangka is the sacred teachings of Buddha, not the talents of the artist.

All revenue from the sale of these Thangkas is returned to Ashal and the painters he helps. No administrative fees or commissions are held back.

