

# THE CHRISTMAS THANGKA©

*PROCEEDS FROM THIS BOOK AND PAINTING  
BENEFIT SHERPA FAMILIES AND MONKS  
CONNECTED TO  
NGAGYUR DONGAK CHOLING MONASTERY  
PARPHING, NEPAL*

## **What is this?**

The Christmas Thangka is an art project in three parts: 1) a digitally created photo-painting, digitally printed on cloth and sewn as a Tibetan thangka; 2) this text; and 3) you, the viewer. The viewer has an opportunity to participate in the artwork by metaphorically entering the painting and discovering a Pure Land—the sacred Junbesi Valley in Nepal—where Santa is distributing gifts.

## **Merry Christmas!**

The Junbesi Valley of Nepal is the cultural heartland of the Sherpa people. Sherpas are world-famous as mountaineers who routinely summit Mount Everest and other 8,000 meter peaks, but Sherpas also work as scholars, artists and spiritual adepts.

In addition to being emblematic of the Spirit of Christmas, The Christmas Thangka is intended to serve as a sustainable substitute for evergreen trees. Instead of placing gifts under a flammable evergreen tree, gifts may be placed under a painting of Santa Claus visiting the Tibetan Buddhist Sherpa people in the Himalayas.

Santa's roots go back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Greek bishop, Saint Nikolaos of Myra, an ancient town along the southern coast of what is now Turkey. Nikolaos was known for spontaneously giving coins as gifts, but he would hide them, at night in a shoe for example, where the owner would discover the present in the morning. Legends surrounding Nikolaos and his unselfishness were popularized by the Dutch who translated *Saint Nikolaos* as *Sinterklaas*, which is where we get Santa Claus. Dutch immigrants living in early British America mixed Sinterklaas with the British Father Christmas to begin the evolution of the American Santa.

An interesting historical note: during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet's single largest export *anywhere* was yak tails to the United States. Specifically, white yak tails used exclusively as Santa Claus beards.

The Christmas Thangka is not specifically a Tibetan, Sherpa, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian or Jewish work of art although all of these cultures collaborate to convey the central theme: a vision of Santa Claus visiting the Sherpa homeland. Santa visits everyone on earth each Christmas and to each person he imparts the Christmas Spirit in their own

language even employing unique idioms to facilitate communication. Santa does no less among the Sherpas.

### **Santa Kubera**

In our painting, Santa assumes the figure of Kubera the same way that ordinary people dress up as Santa Claus every year. Kubera is an ancient Hindu deity who entered Buddhism and who symbolizes wealth, benefit and gain. The birth of Jesus occasioned valuable gifts too: gold, frankincense and myrrh given as offerings by three Zoroastrian Magi.

Kubera is monarch of the Yakshas, deep nature spirits that inhabit trees, the earth itself and mountains. It's no coincidence that Yakshas live in places where humans harvest substantial quantities of wealth. Kubera, as the Yaksha king, commands infinite riches.

Ever since 1823 when a theology professor in New York City named Clement Clarke Moore published "T'was the Night Before Christmas", Santa Claus has been imagined as an elf. So too is Kubera diminutive, a dwarf, and just like Santa is also pot bellied. While the rotund gut may be a graphic cliché, universally signifying wealth, when Kubera passed into the Buddhist pantheon he acquired an unusual pet, a mongoose that vomits wish-granting jewels. This is a truly peculiar ability but perhaps no stranger than a goose that lays golden eggs. And as you can see, wish-granting jewels are also, significantly, egg shaped.

### **Wish-Granting Jewels**

The Tibetan word for wish-granting jewel is norbu. The mongoose is symbolically imagined as producing norbu but he really has purloined them from the real producers, the nagas, half-human half-snake creatures who farm norbu beneath the sea. Nagas cultivate vast quantities of norbu under water—the metaphoric subconscious—and they protect this staggering wealth with their formidable serpent defenses.

The mongoose has a unique ability to combat poisonous snakes, hence his role as purveyor of norbu. The pet mongoose in Santa's lap coughs up a blue wish-granting jewel, another red one weighs down the end of Santa's hat. Tibetans and Sherpas insist that norbu—real wish-granting jewels—exist. That's why they put them in paintings, to alert us.

Finding a real Norbu would be the ultimate Christmas gift because, as the name implies, anything wished for manifests instantly. Tibetans claim norbu are strewn all over the place just waiting to be found, but the trick is recognizing one. The ability to recognize norbu requires a special kind of insight produced by intense feelings of unselfishness, thereby setting up an interesting paradox. The implication is that people who actually find wish-granting jewels are not wishing for things for themselves; their want is the need of others. Suddenly the wish-granting jewel is a symbol of selfless altruism, turning the idea

of the most intense personal gain into active compassionate concern for other people: the Wisdom of Santa Claus in a nutshell.

The Biblical equivalent of this mechanism might be the Greek word *agape*. In the early Church, *agape* represented brotherly love among believers, implicitly suggesting altruism. Over the centuries, the term expanded to imply the love between mankind and God, the eventual result sees mankind subsumed in God; the very definition of selflessness.

### **Entering The Christmas Thanka**

Traditional Tibet was a horse and yak nomad culture and because of the periodic need to pull up stakes and move all of one's earthly goods elsewhere, the rollable scroll became the most practical way to transport religious paintings. In Tibetan, *thangka* means something rolled up.

Most thankas are meditation aids and may contain a wide variety of symbolic subject matter, e.g. specific religious practices; histories; hagiographies; the *regula* of cenobites, even symbols of profound and ineffable experiences, the Buddha figure itself for example, or a mandala. But not all thangkas depict ineffable mysteries. Some tell simple stories, the Jataka Tales, for example, an anthology of stories of the Buddha's previous lives as various animals. The Jataka Tales are believed to be the source of Aesop's Fables.

All thangkas are oriented, with east at the bottom. Since thangkas function as meditation aids, the viewer *enters* the painting from the bottom, from the east, mimicking the rising sun. In other words the implied significance of the painting is supposed to *dawn* on you.

Equally true would be that you dawn on the painting, either way is correct because the artistic journey hopes to eventually *merge* the viewer with the meaning of the painting. In this case, as the viewer cultivates a genuine selfless concern for other people; the viewer imitates what Santa does. In the spirit of Thomas à Kempis, *De Imitatione Christi*; By imitating Santa we become him.

### **An Entrance Fee**

Before dawning on anything, there is an unusual entrance fee to the sacred world: the viewer is asked to sacrifice all sensory input. This may sound like another paradox; how does a viewer view anything without senses?

Senses produce a chattering, constantly changing, sensory-datastream, and moving beyond that stream leads to the quiet, eternal, unchanging, present moment. That's where the painting lives. The world in the painting is an infinite Pure Land inhabited by immortals like Santa Claus and Buddhas and is distinct from the finite, profane world limited by death. Pure implies something unadulterated, something genuine, or real, the eternal Kingdom of Heaven.

On many thangkas, on the bottom at the eastern entrance, are offerings that include: a cloth for touch; incense for smell; fruit for taste; cymbals for hearing; a mirror for sight and a book representing the mind. Different items may be used to suggest the specific senses but collectively they signify the five usual senses plus the mind. The mind is considered a sense among Sherpas because thought is constantly changing, just like the other non-stop sensory datastreams. Think of sensory input in art terms. The fact that sense data constantly change, means that our senses create *representations* of reality, not a direct experience.

At the bottom of The Christmas Thangka is a pile of traditional Christmas gifts. The gifts serve double duty, firstly they represent the spirit of Christmas giving in the same way a pile of gifts under a tree may simultaneously promise both gain and generosity. But the gifts in The Christmas Thangka suggest the traditional Buddhist sense-offerings too, because Christmas gifts may also contain tactile, loud, odiferous, blinding, delicious and intellectually stimulating things. The pile of traditional Christmas gifts becomes the sense sacrifice, transforming the viewer and ushering them into the sacred valley inside the painting.

### **The Wind Horses**

Just above the pile of gifts are three Wind Horses each bearing three flaming wish-granting jewels tied to pack saddles. Sherpas print images of horses on flags with prayers, mantras or other important messages. As the wind snaps the flag, the Wind Horse carries the message aloft, and appropriately enough, using the earth's *breath* communicates these meanings over vast distances to other persons and to other creatures. In the west, Santa has flying caribou for transport, in Tibetan culture it's Wind Horses.

As we continue deeper into the painting, moving upwards along the Sun's path toward the west at the top, we next come to the famous quote in Greek: Εἶναι πιο ευλογημένο να δίνεις παρά να παίρνεις. "It is more blessed to give than to receive", Acts 20:35. This statement, in which the speaker quotes Jesus, echoes the importance of giving as a sacrifice, not in the sense of loss but as an act that makes something sacred.

Centuries ago, translators used the Old English word *halig*—which became the modern word holy—to translate the Latin word for sacred, *sacrare*. Holy both derives from and implies the word *whole*, a completeness, a singular thing. In other words something sacred or holy is wholly complete, something that doesn't change, doesn't need to change because it is complete—the entire universe thought of as a single atom, for example, as the Jesuit paleontologist Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, once observed. The correlate to this might be His Holiness the Dalai Lama's book: *The Universe in a Single Atom*. Either way, It is more blessed to give than to receive because giving anything to other people has the potential to make the entire universe a sacred place.

Just above the quote from the New Testament is a Tibetan proverb: To Live in harmony with all people is the essence of morality. The Tibetan word chös (Skt dharma) here translated as morality, can mean several different things but may be assumed to be a way

of life that follows a scrupulously ethical path. The spiritually adept, once treading this path, sees through the defilements that stain ordinary people and know them all to be, in reality, Buddhas. If the viewer grasps this message, they have entered the painting.

### **The Sacred Valley**

As mentioned above, our scene takes place in the sacred Junbesi Valley in Nepal, not far from Mount Everest. At the top of the Valley, to Santa's lower right, is Thupten Chöling Gompa, a Tibetan monastery of nearly 200 nuns and monks built after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. Thupten Chöling was established by the late Trulshig Rinpoche who previously lived at Dzarongpu monastery at the foot of Mount Everest on the Tibet side. Sherpas, who originally came from Tibet to Nepal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, maintained their strong cultural ties with Tibet. Numerous Sherpa scholars, painters and just plain monks studied at Dzarongpu monastery. Many Sherpa monasteries were originally founded under its aegis.

Above Santa's head and to his left looms the 26,000 foot (7,900 meters) Numbur peak, part of the Himalayan backbone. Numbur is also home to the *locus genii* of the Junbesi Valley, a chthonic male deity astride a horse. Immediately below Numbur peak, out of frame at 13,000 feet (4,000 meters), sits a large glacial runoff lake. The bride of the mountain god lives in this lake. She is a naga princess who cultivates wish-granting norbu beneath the icy waters.

A Christmas wreath hovers in space above Santa's right hand index finger. The wreath encompasses the "third norbu", symbolized by empty space. The meaning should be clear by now, to achieve your greatest desires, cultivate altruism, compassion and empathy. The trick here is to imitate Santa's extraordinary generosity and not to expect anything in return. The sacrifice must be total, complete, in other words, holy, for it to be Santa's work.

The wreath and the spray around Santa are made of holly, deemed significant for millennia because as an evergreen, holly never dies. Ancient Celts considered the red fruit a symbol of the blood of the goddess. Christians saw the Blood of Christ and the sharp points on the leaves recalled the crown of thorns.

As we continue to dawn on the painting, we come to three Buddhas sitting in clouds above the wreath. These three are the Buddhas of the past, Kashyapa, the present, Shakyamuni, and the future, Maitreya, here collectively representing time.

The Past and Future may be very convincing to us, we have memories of the past and we fully expect the future, but the past and the future cannot be real. Sherpas characterize the future as fishing in a dry river bed. There's nothing there. The past only exists as memory which is notoriously arbitrary and inaccurate, sometimes even wildly so. Meditation and stilling sensory input brings the eternal present moment into unchanging focus. It's always now, after all. The bottom line is that the past is fiction, the eternal present is non-fiction and the future is science fiction.

## **Nyima Dawa**

As we continue to dawn to the very top of the painting we arrive at the two illuminators of the scene below, the Sun, Nyima, on Santa's right, and the Moon, Dawa, on his left. The Sun and the Moon present the viewer with another unique entrée to the painting. The viewer is invited to bilaterally align themselves appropriately, so that the Sun is on one's right and the Moon is on one's left. The obvious result is that the viewer is now looking out of the thangka through Santa's eyes. The viewer becomes a duplicate of Santa. This is the secret teaching of the disciple Saint Thomas. The secret is in his name, Jude Didymus Thomas. Jude, a common given name, was one of four brothers of Jesus, but Jude seems set apart in a special relationship. His name Didymus is the Greek word for twin and Thomas is the Aramaic word for twin.

In 1945, Egyptian shepherds discovered The Gospel of Thomas (circa 40 to 140 CE), a text excluded from the canonical collection of other gospels but appears to contain previously unknown statements uttered by Jesus. Imitating Jesus, or in this case Santa, makes you a metaphorical twin.

Verse 113 of the Gospel of Thomas describes the coming Kingdom of the Father in the same way Tibetans describe norbu: *"His disciples said to him, 'When will the kingdom come?' Jesus said, 'It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'here it is' or 'there it is.' Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."*

The Sun and Moon symbolize universal opposites: day and night; left and right, male and female, et cetera, even conscious attention and the infinite subconscious. The Sun, representing pinpoint consciousness, is complimented by the Moon representing the immense female ocean of awareness. In our painting, the primary female principle, the Great Mother, Prajnaparamita, is the infinite emptiness upon which the whole artwork manifests. She is the great void or the blank canvass. Both in Tibetan Buddhism and in astrophysics, complete and total emptiness is not actually empty. Total emptiness in space has quantum potential, or what astrophysicists call Zero-point energy. The entire universe spontaneously manifests out of *nothing* that has a built in potential. The universe was not created; it grows this way organically.

Imagining oneself as Santa encourages the imitation of his good works, like developing a selfless concern for others and quieting sensory chatter to reveal a still, non-changing, experience. "Be still, and know that I *am* God", Psalm 46:10, could very well serve as, a wisdom of Santa Claus in this particular.

## **About the Artist**

HR Downs has lived in Nepal, on and off for 12 years since 1969. Downs spent two years as an apprentice to the Sherpa hermit monk painter Ngawong Lekshit, or Auleshi. His book, *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1980 and

reprinted in 1996 by Book Faith India, contains a photo essay on this unusual yogi-painter. After years of employing traditional painting techniques, computers opened an entirely new way to imagine and record the extramundane as an extension of photography.

Santa Claus is a serious figure in Christendom but his message can be drowned out by what some people see as hyperactive if not runaway commercialization. The Christmas Thangka hopes to *remember* this *dismembered* message by providing a mechanism with which the art audience may *merge* with the Christmas Spirit.

The Christmas Thangka contains original drawings; scans of drawings; original digital photographs and numerous overall manipulations in software. All printing and sewing done in Nepal.

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