

The Lukhang

Rising out of a copse of willows on an island beneath the **Dalai Lamas'** Potala Palace, the Lukhang could originally only be reached by boat. The temple's symmetrical design and ascending levels form a three-dimensional *maṇḍala*, a Buddhist representation of the integral harmony of the cosmos and the human psyche. This ideal of harmony is further reflected in the Lukhang's integration of three distinct architectural styles – Tibetan, Chinese and Mongolian – representing Tibet's complex political alliances at the turn of the 17th century.

The Lukhang's lower level, built in Tibetan style, honours the elemental, serpentine forces of nature that Tibetans call *lu*. The temple's second storey, in Chinese style, houses a shrine to the mythical Lord of the *lu*, flanked by statues of the **Sixth Dalai Lama** and **Padmasambhava**, the revered Indian master who introduced Tantric Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century. A sweeping Mongolian-style roof shelters the meditation chamber on the Lukhang's uppermost floor and its wall paintings depicting advanced practices of Tantric yoga and '**Great Perfection**' teachings on the essence of enlightenment. A thousand-armed statue of **Avalokiteśvara**, the embodiment of universal compassion that Tibet's Dalai Lamas are said to represent, stands at the heart of the once-secret chamber.

The Lukhang's historical and cultural origins

Lukhang means 'Temple to the Serpent Spirits' and refers to its origins in a vision that came to Tibet's **Fifth Dalai Lama** (1617–1682). A serpent-like water deity called a *lu* appeared to him during his meditations and warned that construction of the Potala Palace was disturbing the subterranean realm of the *lu*. In an act of reconciliation, the Fifth Dalai Lama vowed to build a temple to appease the *lu* once the Potala Palace was completed. This promise was fulfilled during the lifetime of the **Sixth Dalai Lama** (1683–1706) who made the resulting island temple his primary residence; there, he satisfied his controversial preference for romantic trysts and poetic composition over affairs of state. Over succeeding centuries the Lukhang continued to serve Tibet's **Dalai Lamas** as a place of spiritual inspiration and contemplative retreat.

The wall paintings in the Lukhang's uppermost chamber illustrate *Dzogchen*, or '**Great Perfection**', teachings of the eighth-century Tantric master **Padmasambhava**. These teachings were 'revealed' in a text by **Orgyen Pema Lingpa** (1450–1521), an enlightened Tantric master from Bhutan who was a direct ancestor of Tibet's Sixth Dalai Lama.



Image of Lukhang mural detail courtesy of Thomas Laird

Tibetan medicine and subtle anatomy

The Lukhang murals are believed to have been commissioned by **Desi Sangye Gyatso** (1653–1705), the acting governor of Tibet between the death of the **Fifth Dalai Lama** in 1682 and the enthronement of the **Sixth Dalai Lama** in 1697. In the same period, Sangye Gyatso also commissioned a series of 79 scroll paintings outlining Tibetan medicine's understanding of the human body and approach to optimal health. 20th-century versions of several of these scroll paintings are exhibited in this room.

Traditional Tibetan medicine draws extensively from Indian and Chinese sources in its description of subtle energy currents within the body that determine physical and mental wellbeing. Representations of the three most important energy channels and their anatomical focal points occur repeatedly in the Lukhang's northern mural and signify the enhanced flow of energy and awareness achieved through Tantric Buddhist practice. Other visual representations in the murals of internal experiences of yoga and meditation include figures (such as the one shown on this panel) contemplating geometric representations of earth, water, fire, air and space, symbolising the five constituents of consciousness and the material world.



Image of Lukhang mural detail courtesy of Thomas Laird

***Tantra*: embodying enlightenment**

Tantra arose in medieval India as a cultural movement that sought to reconcile spirituality with sensory experience and the creative imagination. With the Sanskrit root *tan*, meaning ‘to expand’, and *tra*, meaning ‘methodology’, Buddhist texts called ‘*Tantras*’ expanded the scope of existing Buddhist doctrines and extended their applicability beyond monastic institutions.

The core texts of Tantric Buddhism appeared in India between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The anonymously authored works modulate Buddhism’s earlier emphasis on life’s inevitable dissatisfactions and promote actively cultivating joy and compassion. Unbound from Buddhism’s originally ascetic character, the “indestructible vehicle” of ***Vajrayāna*** (or Tantric) Buddhism offered a means for positive change in individual and collective lives. To that end, Tantric deities were not conceived as objects of worship but as representations of the human potential to transcend egocentric concerns and embody universal qualities of wisdom and compassion.

As seen on this panel, the Tantric journey depicted in the Lukhang murals encompasses rapture, terror and self-transcendence. The murals and the following rooms present specific methods used in Tantric Buddhism for freeing the mind from its limitations and embracing all experience with insight and compassion.



The daemonic divine

Tibetan monasteries typically include chapels dedicated to ‘wrathful’ guardian deities representing wisdom and compassion in dynamic form. As can be seen on this panel, the doors leading into the Lukhang’s ground-floor chapel are adorned with intertwining *lu* – volatile serpent spirits that also signify untamed energies of human consciousness. The Tantric Buddhist deity visible at the shrine beyond – Senge Dra – rides on a snow lion and, wielding a ritual trident, both subdues and illuminates the psychic forces that the *lu* embody.

Like the ground-floor chapel in the Lukhang, this room represents a threshold – a transition from mundane reality to engagement with the primal aspects of the human condition. Ornaments of human bone, such as those worn by Tantric practitioners, boldly display life’s fundamental impermanence, and ritual instruments fashioned from skulls and thighbones are widely used in Tantric rites to cultivate unconditional awareness. Pilgrims in Tibet typically pay homage to these integral forces of mind and body in their journey towards a state of being beyond self-identification, suffering and strife.



Tibetan yogas of body, breath, and mind

Beyond Tibetan Buddhism's outward forms lies a hidden world of yogic practices that cultivate subtle awareness through physical exercises, breath control and focused visualisation. Based on Tantric principles of bringing all aspects of experience onto the spiritual path, practices of Tibetan yoga range from masked dance ceremonies to sequenced exercises that concentrate attention, energy and sensation in the body's central core to induce self-transcendent awareness. This unification of body, breath and mind is illustrated in the manuscript folio on this panel, which depicts a series of yogic postures and exercises accompanied by a specially designed 'meditation belt'.

Combining stillness and movement, receptivity and creative imagination, the practices of Tibetan yoga bring strength and flexibility to both mind and body. Because of their dynamic effects and potential for misapplication, the practices of 'channels and winds' (*tsa lung*) and 'magical movements' (*trul khor*) are traditionally held to be secret and practised only under close supervision by a qualified teacher. Nonetheless, His Holiness the **Fourteenth Dalai Lama** has increasingly encouraged scientific study of Tibetan yoga's potential for enhancing physical health, cognitive abilities and emotional wellbeing.



Yogas of Fire and Light

In Tibetan Buddhism, the physically demanding practices of *trul khor* commonly precede more subtle Tantric practices undertaken during states of waking, sexual union, sleeping, dreaming and dying.

The so-called 'Six Yogas' are designed to cultivate lucid awareness within all phases of human experience and, as shown in the photograph on this panel, to focus energy and concentration in the heart centre. Visualising the body as a translucent network of energy channels (Illusory Body Yoga), practitioners engage in the Yoga of Inner Fire (*tummo*) to increase vitality and sensation. The Yoga of Radiant Light and the Yoga of Conscious Dreaming are practised while sleeping and reveal possibilities that normal waking consciousness obscures. The Yoga of Transitional States (*bardo*) prepares practitioners for the possibility of psychological continuity after death, and the Yoga of Transference (*powa*) (pictured prominently on the Lukhang's northern mural and at the far end of this room) offers a method of projecting the mind into a paradisiacal Buddha Realm at the moment of death. The supplementary Yoga of Union, practised either with a real or visualised partner, further enhances subjective states of bliss and luminosity.



Mindfulness, meditation, and beyond

The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*, meaning mindfulness of one's inherent 'Buddha nature', a self-transcendent state of empathy, insight and spontaneous altruism. Although Tantric Buddhism includes a multitude of meditation techniques, the Lukhang murals reveal a system of mental cultivation called ***Dzogchen***, or '**Great Perfection**', that was introduced in Tibet in the eighth century by **Padmasambhava**.

Based on present moment awareness of the mind's intrinsic freedom from discursive thought processes and conditioned behaviour, *Dzogchen* is presented as the innate human potential to live beyond limiting beliefs or psychological stress. When integrated into all aspects of one's experience, *Dzogchen* is upheld as the culmination of the spiritual path in which mind and body, reason and intuition, and intention and application function in unison.

Although physical yoga, breathing practices and mindfulness training help to align the mind with its fundamental nature, *Dzogchen* ultimately does not require them. Padmasambhava described *Dzogchen* as "the mind looking directly into its own essence", a seamless continuum of perceiver, perceived and the act of perception. This open presence and '**non-dual**' awareness at the heart of Tantric Buddhism is vividly illustrated throughout the Lukhang murals.



Image of Lukhang mural detail courtesy of Thomas Laird

Tibetan Buddhism, meditation, and mindfulness today

The Tibetan Buddhist teachings depicted on the walls of the Lukhang are widely practised today both within and outside of Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism's diverse approaches to mental cultivation are also the subject of scientific investigations into their potential impact on physiological and psychological health and the enhancement of human potential.

The health benefits of diverse meditation practices from an array of Asian Buddhist lineages awakened the interest of Western scientists in the 1960s, when fascination with Eastern spiritual traditions was burgeoning in the West. Collaborations between Tibetan Buddhism and Western science began after the (current) **Fourteenth Dalai Lama's** first visit to the USA in 1979. His interest in science – coupled with his willingness to allow Tibetan Buddhist monks to participate in scientific experiments – encouraged a range of investigations into the neurological correlates of meditation, which continue to this day through initiatives of the Mind and Life Institute and related organisations.

The health benefits of mindfulness, a practice central to all Buddhist lineages, have also been the subject of scientific research in the past 35 years, which has led to the development of a variety of stress-reduction programmes. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, for example, has become a clinical tool recognised by the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for the treatment of anxiety and depression.

With the encouragement of the **Dalai Lama**, scientists are beginning to investigate the reputed physiological and cognitive benefits of Tibet's once highly secret Tantric yogas of breath control and dynamic movement, as illustrated in the Lukhang murals.