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Spontaneous Presence: The Rapid Normalization of Padmasambhava's Iconography in Image (and Text)

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Students of the history of Tibetan Buddhism are familiar with the renowned tantrika Padmasambhava and his eminent role in establishing Buddhism throughout the kingdoms of the Himalaya in the eighth century. They also learn that Padmasambhava is venerated by his followers as the Second Buddha, and manifests in eight different forms, the most well-known being the pacifistic, mustachioed master in a seated position, and the fierce-looking wrathful Dorje Dröllo (*rdo rje gro lod*) riding a tigress. But where did the idea of Padmasambhava's eight emanations originate, and why are there eight names that became normative? These are questions that Professor Daniel Hirshberg, author of [Remembering the Lotus-Born](#) (Wisdom Publications, 2016) and professor in the Department of Classics, Philosophy and Religion at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia, has explored as part of his extensive research on Padmasambhava.

His discoveries, which he shared with an eclectic circle of scholars and students at McGill University on October 20, 2017, point to the twelfth-century treasure revealer from Southern Tibet, Nyang-ral Nyima

Özer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*, 1124-92) who developed the (presumably) historic person of Padmasambhava into a mythic figure in his *Copper Island Biography* (*zangs gling ma*). In this text, Padmasambhava receives numerous names, epithets and titles that refer to various key moments in his life, such as his ordination, his enthronement, or his tantric empowerments. His most generic name, the Lotus-Born (Padmasambhava, or Pema Jung-ne (*padma 'byung gnas*)), for example, is tied to the narrative of him magically surviving the punishment of being burnt at the stakes. It is only in a second hagiography on Padmasambhava, also written by Nyang-ral towards the end his life, that the author establishes a fixed set of eight emanations, which he says to have encountered in a vision. Interestingly, one of the emanations carries the author's own name, Nyima Özer, thus suggesting a close link between Guru Rinpoche and his biographer. Aware of his humble background, Nyang-ral seeks to establish himself as an authoritative teacher and the reincarnation of an enlightened being. His plan succeeded, since this little-known Buddhist master plays a crucial role in shaping our ideas of the early transmission of Buddhism to Tibet.

Dr. Hirshberg's explanations, supported by visuals of rare scroll paintings of the eight emanations, went into impressive details about the textual and historical developments that worked together to produce the normative eight names of Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche, the "precious guru," as his followers call him. Dr. Hirshberg's research traces how his fame was built as a conglomerate of hagiographic narrative, liturgy, iconography, interweaving elements of the indigenous Bon and imported Buddhist traditions. The discussion following Dr. Hirshberg's presentation continued the reflection about the formation of a Buddhist identity during the first centuries of Dharma transmission from India to Tibet. It was pointed out, that, despite the fact that Tibetan masters generally sought to establish their authority by pointing to Indian sources, Nyang-ral took a different rationale when he traced his own identity

back to Padmasambhava, whose activity took place predominantly in Tibet. Rather than looking to India for authorization, Nyang-ral relied on Tibetan roots alone, by relying on *treasures* (*gter ma*), i.e. discoveries of hidden teachings by former Buddhist masters, notably Padmasambhava. In the discussion, it was also hypothesized that the eight names of Padmasambhava, might nevertheless emulate Indian antecedents, namely the practice of praising the Buddha via his names or epithets, as it is known from the *Mañjuśrī-Nāma-Saṃgīti* (Chanting the Names of Mañjuśrī), the *Thirty-Five Buddhas*, or the *Praises to the Twenty-One Tāras*. The Eight Names of the Guru (*gu ru mtshan rgyad*) have proven to provide a stable and enduring core structure for devotional supplications and soteriological liturgies centering on Padmasambhava.