

SCOTT SEMANS

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INFO SHEET NO 11

THE GADEN TANGKA OF TIBET

One of the most fascinating coins on the numismatic scene today is the Gaden Tangka of Tibet, also called the Tangka Ghabo, and Dkar-po (White) Tangka. It was issued in large quantities from several different mints over a period of about eighty years, during which time it was Tibet's most important coin. Its seemingly endless and frustratingly complex variations have challenged many an ambitious collector to try and set chaos to order. This Information Sheet is the result of my own examination of about 1000 coins in the light of some excellent research by several serious students of Tibetan coinage. Until these studies are published the following may serve as a useful guide to collectors of the Gaden Tangka.

HISTORY

Until the late 18th Century Tibet imported regular Nepalese coins for use in local trade. Disputes with the Nepalese over the quality of that coinage, the "Black Tangka" (K1353), led to war and later occupation by Tibet's Chinese allies. To demonstrate allegiance to China, small issues of silver tangkas (K1457-1476) and other coins were struck in the names of three Emperors. However, the demands of expanding local commerce and foreign trade made necessary a coinage which would be readily accepted, and led to Tibet's first autonomous coin issues. Debased copies of a Nepalese mohur of Pratap Simha were produced (C27) in small quantity, as were coins of a largely original design, the Kong-par Tangka (K1430-1436, C60) beginning in 1790. But the coin that was to finally fill the bill was not hit upon until some fifty years later.

It is now generally thought that the first Gaden tangka (Type A), a distinct type basically unlike later types, was minted in small quantity circa 1840-50 at Dod-pal, near the Potala (winter palace of the Dali Lama) in Lhasa, Tibet's capital. The design is flowing and well-executed; as Kann notes, it was probably the work of a Nepalese engraver. The Gaden Tangka was not really produced in quantity, however, until about 1870-75 when a modified design (Type B) of slightly lesser weight was minted at Dod-pal. Thereafter at irregular intervals until about 1925 several additional types were coined at the arsenal east of Lhasa, and at the Dokde and Mekyi mints. These later issues are distinguished by changes in the average weight as well as various design elements. Toward the end of its long issue, machinery was introduced to cut blanks and finally to strike the coins themselves.

Throughout its history the Gaden, or Dkar-po, meaning literally "white" Tangka from the color of its high-purity silver, remained fairly constant in weight and purity, while the Srang, with which it was in commerce, suffered debasement. Initially 1 Tangka = 15 Skar = 1½ Sho = .15 Srang (Chinese Tael) but by 1950 a Srang was worth only 1½ Tangkas. The low-cost availability of this coin from India today attests both to its prodigious original mintage and its extensive use in border regions (3 Tangka = 1 Rupee). Kempf estimates an original mintage of 50 million, though even this seems low.

DESCRIPTION

At the center of the obverse (as I designate it) is a purnaghata (Vase of Abundance) often called a "flower." Following successively outward from the center are: a circle, eight fleurets each containing a symbol of the Astamangala (Buddhist lucky symbols) interspersed at their bases with a dot and at their tops with a dot, dots, or "squiggles," another circle, a ring of pearls or dots, and in some types, a final circle. The Astamangala symbols are, moving clockwise in the illustration above: Umbrella of sovereignty, Two golden fishes of good fortune, Pot of ambrosia, Lotus, Conch shell, Emblem of endless rebirth, Banner of victory, and Wheel of empire. Stepping back for an overall look, the eight fleurets can themselves be seen as petals with the circled purnaghata as the center of a large opened lotus blossom.

The center of the reverse is occupied by either a dot or a spiraling "gem" forming the center of a stylized lotus blossom contained in a convex octagon. "Spokes" sometimes protrude from between the petals to touch the octagon. Surrounding this is a mandala of fleurets bearing Tibetan words and separated at their tops by dots or "squiggles" (~~~~). This whole is finally encompassed by a circle, a ring of dots and, in some types, a further circle. The inscription within the fleurets reads, beginning at the top in the illustration and proceeding clockwise, "dga ldan pho brang pyud las rnam rgyal," loosely translated as "From the seat of Government, Victorious in all directions," which is a euphemism for "Government of Tibet," probably employed to avoid offending the Chinese overlords. The translation by laCouperie as reported in Kann and incorporating the date 1772 is now known to be incorrect.

The basic motifs of successive circles, rings of dots, and the eight-petalled mandalas bearing lucky symbols and inscriptions is a Nepalese invention of the early 1700's. The purnaghata and lotus centers, as well as the inscription, are Tibetan additions.

TYOLOGY

During the eighty years of its off-and-on production, as issue of the Gaden Tangka shifted from mint to mint, mintmaster to mintmaster, and as one die-cutter followed another, changes in the design - both major and minor - were bound to occur, and occur they did! Some of the changes were obviously intentional; others, intentional or not, are helpful in assigning chronological order and place of minting, while the majority offer no more than tantalizing clues to a seemingly meaningful, if not intentional, pattern which only careful study and research can hope to reveal. However, when one has some sort of a framework to use, a simple mechanical sorting of loose coins into major types, varieties, and subvarieties is not difficult. The "points of change" which make possible a logical grouping of these coins fall into three areas:

(1) "Dots & Squiggles" (• & ~~~~~) Kann hit upon the basic typological designators for the Gaden Tangka series: the small "squiggles" and dot or dots which appear above and between the fleurets on either side of the coin. Why this seemingly insignificant feature should be so important in determining mint and chronology and forming a structural basis for other changes is a mystery to me, but the fact remains that a breakdown according to the "dots & squiggles" is almost necessarily a starting point for meaningful classification of the series. Please note that when I refer to Kann it is to his descriptions of the coins and not to his plates, which are mislabelled.

(2) Obverse & Reverse Types Illustrated below and on the next page are what I have designated as three major obverse types and two major reverse types, though there are significant varieties within most of the types. An examination of each type in turn reinforces the typology laid down by the "dots & squiggles" breakdown and gives clues to a logical ordering of varieties within each type, particularly for the complex Type B:



Obverse 1 The Astamangala is ordered right to left from the top (N,NE,NW,E,W,SE,SW,S). The central flower is ornate and flowing, with no wavy lines at its base. There is no outer line between the circle of pearls and the edge of the flan. *Type A.*

Obverse 2 The central flower is quite different, with two wavy lines beneath.

2a A "dot" to the left of the flower; Five leaves at either side tend to be stubby. *Type B1-B3.*

2b No "dot" to left of flower; Leaves tending to become thinner & longer. *Types B4-B15.*

Obverse 3 The Astamangala is ordered clockwise from the top (N,NE,E,SE,S,SW,W,NW). An additional circle appears between the pearls and the edge of the flan.

3a Leaves become pellet-like; Stem changes from  to ; one dot directly above stem. *Types C, D1-D3.*


3b Six graceful leaves (3 curl up, 3 down) and a dot at either side; three dots above stem; seven dots ranged around base of stem. *Types D4, E1-E5.*


3c Five leaves (3 up, 2 down) and a dot at either side; five dots ranged around base of stem; dot between bottom of fleurets missing. *Types F10-12, 14-17.*

3d No dots at sides of flower. *Types F1-F9, F13.*


3e Shape of fleurets changed and standardized. *Types G,H.*

Reverse 1 Single dot in center of stylized lotus; "Tear" shape within each petal; "Squiggles" form a bold arch, touching fleurets. *Type A.*

Reverse 2 Triple gem in center of lotus; Circle & line () within each petal; "Squiggles" less bold and loose within fleurets.

2a Crescent () in place of squiggle between NW & N fleurets. *Types B2, B2, B4.*

2b  and  in place of plain squiggles at E-NE and W-NW. *Types B5-B11.*

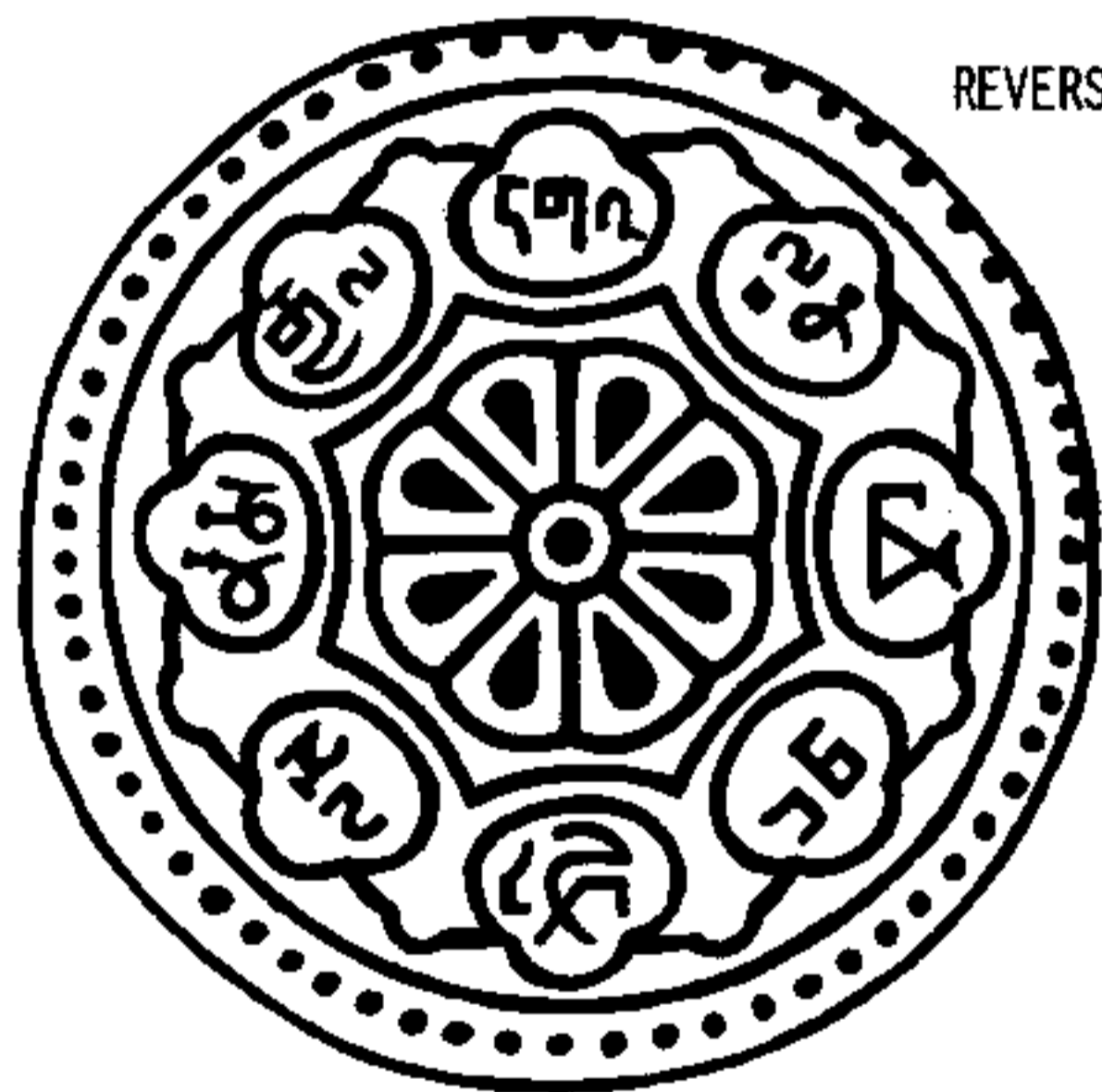
2c  in place of plain squiggle at E-NE. *Types B12-B13.*

2d Regular squiggles. *Types B3, B14-B15.*

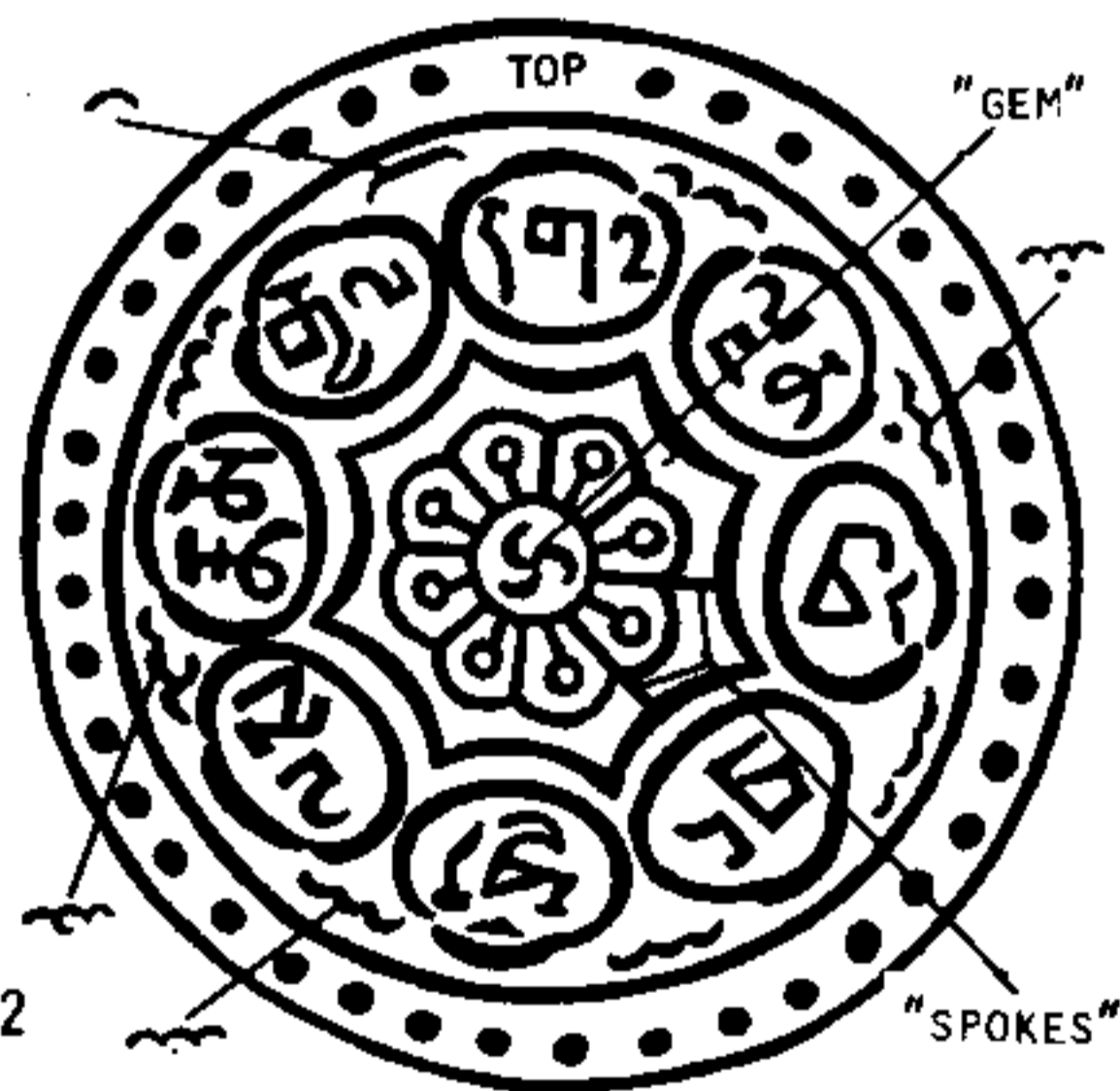
2e Double gem in center of lotus; additional circle between pearls and edge of flan. *Type C1, D3, G.*

2f Spokes extend from between petals of lotus to touch octagon. *Types C2, D1-2, D4, E, F.*

2g Triple gem in center of lotus; broad, tear-shaped fleurets; no spokes. *Type H.*






REVERSE 1






REVERSE 2

(3) Astamangala The most obvious, plentiful, and confusing sources of variation in the Gaden Tangka are the eight lucky symbols of the Astamangala. Indeed, unless one is prepared to examine hundreds of coins in minute detail it is almost impossible to find any two that are exactly alike. However, there are points of similarity and seemingly deliberate change in the forms of various symbols which allow grouping into Varieties, and even hint at a logical ordering of these Varieties. The problem lies in limiting oneself to a finite number of Varieties - that is, in deciding when a given symbol on one coin is "different enough" from the corresponding symbol on another coin to assign it to a separate Variety. In short, what is an important variation and what is merely a vagary of the die cutter? One collector has well over a thousand "different" Gaden Tangkas in his collection and he still adds quite a few every time he looks over a lot, and others who have examined quite a few pieces have concluded that for practical purposes the variation at the minutest level is endless. Therefore, where variations in the Astamangala symbols are marked or consistent but seemingly not of great magnitude, I have designated them as Subvarieties.

As an example, in Type B2 the Ambrosia pot symbol may appear as  or any of several intermediates. Since I found no regular shifts in other Astamangala symbols or design elements corresponding to these variations, I did not break B2 down into additional Varieties, though probably a finite number of distinct Subvarieties could be identified with reference to this symbol alone. On the other hand I have differentiated some varieties (B5, B6, B7, B8 from B9, B10, B11) on the basis of the direction of the fish (swimming CW  vs CCW ) in the Two fish symbol because it seemed to link the B1-B4 group with the obviously different B12-B14 group, though the "wrong way" fish of B15 poses a problem for this theory. Throughout the various types, variations in the Two fish symbol are particularly important. However, it could be argued that the numerous differences in the number and arrangement of

dots in this symbol in Type F, which I have designated as distinct Varieties, are merely the result of die-cutter whim. Particularly rich in seemingly minor variations are the Ambrosia pot, Lotus, and Conch shell symbols, and the degree of rotation of the Two fish in Type B, while the Umbrella and Emblem of rebirth tend to remain fairly static. In the seeming absence of any information on the policies and procedures at the Tibetan mints, and lacking a detailed knowledge of Lamistic Buddhism and Tibetan art traditions, we are ultimately forced to operate half in the dark when it comes to determining the "significance" of the many variations we find in the Gaden Tangka.

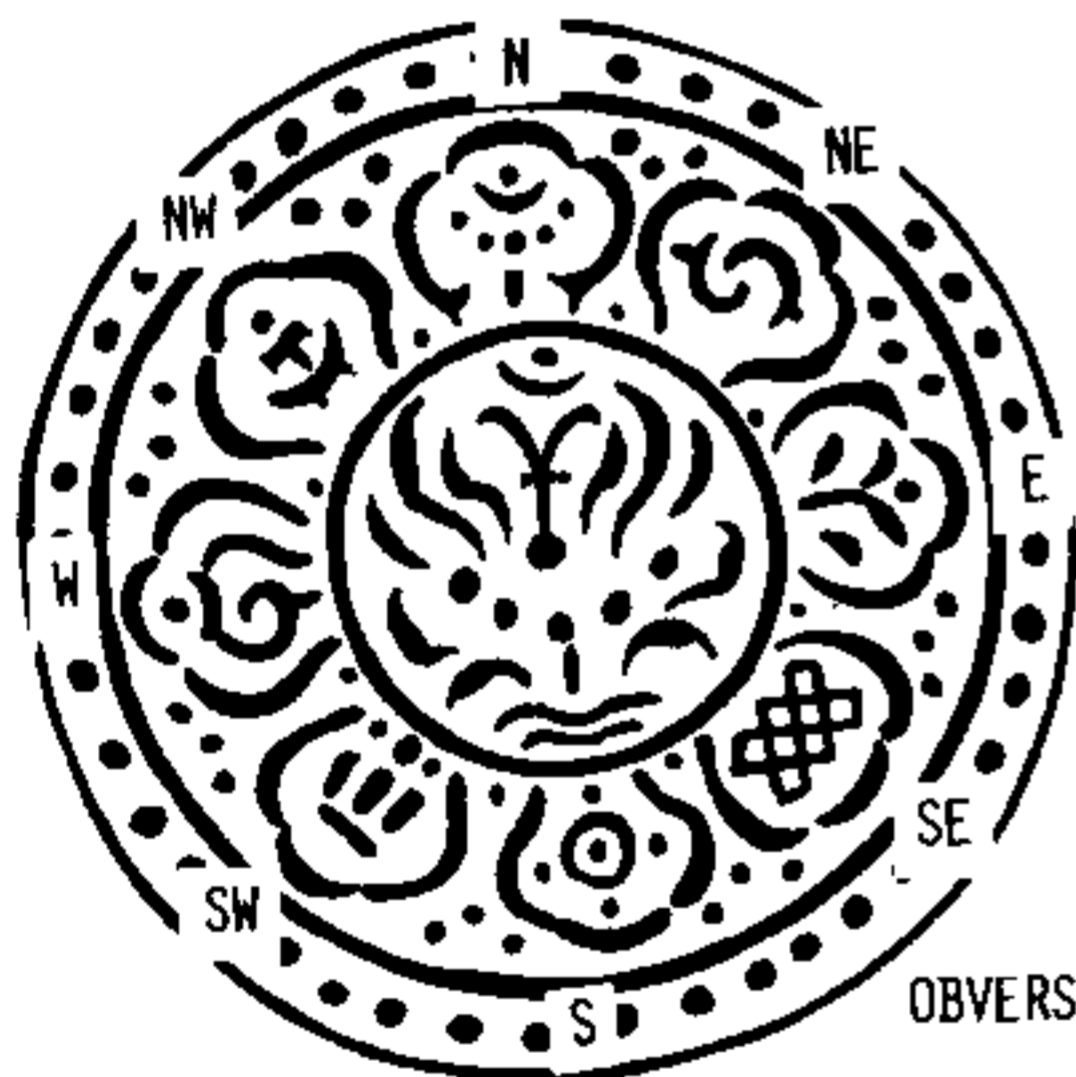
CATALOG AND PRICE LIST

Following are shown the Types (A-H), Varieties (.1 to .17) and some Subvarieties (a,b,c, etc) of the Gaden Tangka, Yeoman #13. Kann numbers refer to his descriptions, not his plates. For the meanings of such conventions as , , , NE etc, see the illustrations. Usually I have shown only enough Astamangala symbols to differentiate one Variety from another; the remaining symbols may or may not change from one variety to the next. Types are arranged chronologically; Varieties within Types are arranged logically where relationships were perceived, and arbitrarily otherwise. The percentage figure following each Type and Variety is based on several different lots examined, totalling 995 good pieces and 5 culls. It should not be taken as an absolute guide to rarity, as proportions do vary from lot to lot; some figures are estimates as I did not distinguish similar varieties when first looking at some early lots. For the dating and mint information I am grateful to Messrs. Charles Panish and Nicholas Rhodes though this may not represent their latest thinking. This information is still quite tentative and only additional research will clarify these important points.

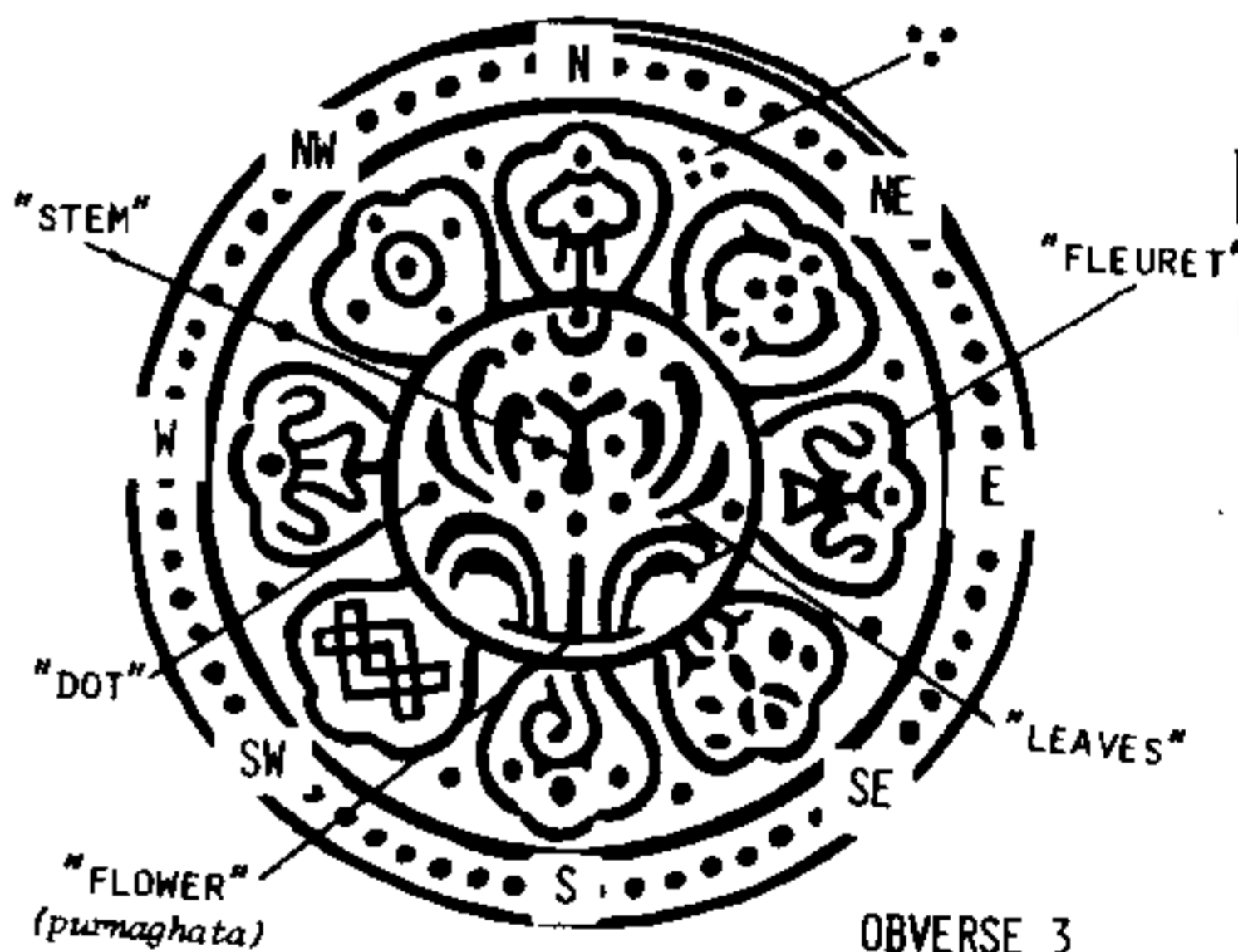
Coins offered for sale generally grade VF, slightly better or worse depending on the scarcity of the piece. If a particular piece is sold out, please try later as I am constantly replenishing stock. I am anxious to examine any Varieties which are not listed below!





OBVERSE 1





OBVERSE 2












OBVERSE 3

TYPE A   (K1426) Obverse 1, Reverse 1. Probably minted circa 1840-50 at Dod-pal in Lhasa. The only type consistently weighing over 5 grams. The unusual flower obv. and lotus rev. make this type easily distinguishable. I have not seen enough specimens to give a meaningful Variety listing, but would direct attention to: Direction of the Two fish NE, Solid vs. dotted cross in the Wheel S, the Flower (1 vs 3 stems at bottom, etc), Filled vs. open lotus petals reverse.









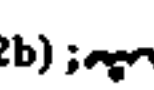


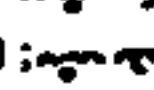
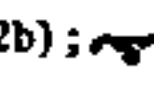


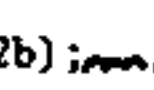


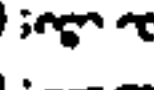








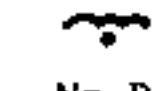
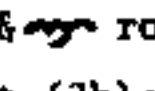
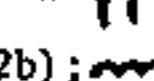


Y13A All Varieties, as available (Vg-F only) 0.5% 10.00


TYPE B   (K1420) Obverse 2, Reverse 2. Probably minted circa 1870-75 at Dod-pal in Lhasa. The most distinguishing feature of this type is the arrangement of the Astamangala. Attention to Obverse & Reverse Types is important for distinguishing Varieties. 23.9%









Y13B.1	Dot	(Obv 2a)		(Rev 2a)	NE 	SW 	0.9%	3.00
Y13B.1b		Similar, but wavy		(may actually be a )		SW 		
Y13B.2	Dot	(Obv 2a)		(Rev 2a)		SW 	8.5%	1.65;	Y13B.2a S 


Numerous Subvarieties; note particularly NW & SW.










TYPE B  CONT.


Y13B.3	Dot (2a); No (2d); NE 	0.1%	6.50	Y13B.11	No Dot (2b);  (2b); W 	0.1%	6.50
Y13B.4	No Dot (2b);  (2a)	0.2%	6.50	Y13B.12	(2b);  (2c); W 	0.1%	6.50
Y13B.5	No Dot (2b);  (2b); W 	0.2%	6.50	Y13B.13	(2b);  W-SW (2c); W  S 	0.1%	6.50
Y13B.6	No Dot (2b);  (2b)	0.4%	4.50	Y13B.13a	(2b);  N-NE (2c)		
Y13B.7	No Dot (2b);  (2b); W 	0.3%	4.50	Y13B.14	(2b);  (2d); W  S 	7.0%	1.65
Y13B.8	No Dot (2b);  (2b)	1.5%	2.00	Y13B.14a-d	W    		
Y13B.9	No Dot (2b);  (2b); NE 	0.2%	6.50	Y13B.14e	W  S 		
Y13B.9a	 &  rotated one position CW			Y13B.15	(2b);  (2d); NE 	1.4%	2.00
Y13B.10	No Dot (2b);  (2b) Numerous Subvarieties of most symbols	1.9%	2.00				

TYPE C  (K-NL) Obverse 3e, Reverse 2. Probably minted circa 1895-98 in the Arsenal mint east of Lhasa. Beginning with this type the lucky symbols are rearranged, the Two fish swim in opposition, the tiny gem at center reverse is composed of two rather than three crescents, and an outer ring appears beyond the circle of dots both obverse and reverse. Differences in the Astamangala are now most important in determining Variety. All varieties show pellet-like leaves (Obverse 3a) 5.0%













Y13C.1	NE  SE  No Spokes (2e)	1.7%	2.25	Y13C.1a	NE  SE  No Spokes (2e)		
Y13C.2	NE  SE  Spokes (2f)	3.3%	2.00	Y13C.2a	NE  SE  Spokes (2f)		


TYPE D  (K1423) Obverse 3, Reverse 2. Probably minted ca. 1898-1903 in the Arsenal Mint. 8.2%























Y13D.1	NE  W  NW  Pellet leaves (3a)			Spokes (2f)		2.7%	2.00
Y13D.2	NE  NW  Pellet leaves (3a)			Spokes (2f)		1.7%	2.00
Y13D.3	W  NW  Pellet leaves (3a)			No Spokes (2e)		1.3%	2.00
Y13D.4	W  NW  Six leaves (3b)			Spokes (2f)		2.5%	2.00


TYPE E  (K1421) Obverse 3b, Reverse 2f. Probably minted ca. 1905-09 at Dokde Mint. 15.5%





All varieties are Six leaves (Obv 3b) and Spokes (Rev 2f).

Y13E.1	NE  S  E 	2.2%	2.00	Y13E.3a	W  E 		
Y13E.2	S  E 	1.8%	2.00	Y13E.3b	Astamangala symbols rotated 1 position CW. Almost certainly a die-cutter error.		
Y13E.3	W  E 	6.9%	1.65	Y13E.4	NW  SE 	0.8%	3.00
	<i>Subvarieties; Note E & W especially.</i>			Y13E.5	NE 	2.8%	2.00

TYPE F  (K1422) Obverse 3, Reverse 2f. Probably minted ca. 1912-25 at Dokde; the Astamangala symbols on Y13F.3 almost exactly match Y14 (1909). This is the commonest type and shows the most variation in the Two fish symbol. Some varieties tend to have rounded (machine cut) planchets. "Lg P" and "Sm P" refer to large (few) or small (numerous) Pearls in the border, obverse. "(3c)" and "(3d)" indicate Obverse Type. 44.5%

Y13F.1	NE  NW  (3d)	11.8%	1.65	Y13F.10	NE  SW  Lg P (3c)	0.1%	5.00
Y13F.2	NW  (3d)	0.9%	3.00	Y13F.11	NE  E  Sm P (3c)	15.7%	1.65
Y13F.3	NW  (3d)	1.5%	2.00	<i>Subvarieties; Note S and E.</i>			
Y13F.4	NW  (3d)	0.2%	5.00	Y13F.12	E  Lg P (3c)	1.9%	2.00
Y13F.5	NE  (3d)	2.0%	2.00	<i>Numerous & extreme Subvarieties, resulting from very poor engraving style.</i>			
Y13F.6	NE  (3d)	0.2%	6.50	Y13F.13	E ? ? (3d)	0%	6.50
Y13F.7	NE  SW  Sm P (3d)	2.2%	2.00	Y13F.14	NE  (3c)	0%	6.50
Y13F.8	NE  SW  Lg P (3d)	2.2%	2.00	Y13F.15	NE  (3c)	0.4%	4.00
Y13F.9	NE  SW  Sm P (3d)	0.1%	5.00	Y13F.16	NE  (3c)	0.1%	5.00
				Y13F.17	NE  (3c)	0.2%	5.00

TYPE G  (K1425) Obverse 3e, Reverse 2e. Probably minted circa 1920 at Mekyi. Machine struck. 1.9%

Y13G.1	NE  NW  E 	1.9%	2.50	Y13G.1a	E 		
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TYPE H  (K-NL) Obverse 3e, Reverse 2g. Probably minted circa 1925 at Mekyi. Machine struck. 0%

Y13H	NE  NW 	All other Astamangala symbols very similar to Y13G					0%
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