

28. SET OF VAJRA AND GHANTA

Copper and mercury gilt copper alloy

Tibeto-Chinese

Ming, ca. mid-15th century

Length (vajra): 17.8 cm (7 in.), height (bell): 23 cm (9.05 in.)

The *vajra* (Tib. *rDo rje*) and *ghanta* (Tib. *dril bu*) are the essential implements of Tantric Buddhism. When a *vajra* is used in conjunction with a bell (of which the handle is a half-*vajra*) the pair symbolizes duality: the *vajra* representing the active principle, the means of attaining enlightenment (thus the actual Buddha manifestation), while the *ghanta* symbolizes the Perfection of Wisdom, known as the Void (Skt. *shunyata*).¹ For Buddhists the active principle is male, while wisdom is regarded as feminine.² On depictions of Vajrayana deities displaying these implements, the *vajra* is usually held in the right hand and the *ghanta* in the left.

This matching set of a *vajra* with its corresponding *ghanta* is a good example of Tibeto-Chinese ritual objects that display the style of the early 15th century, but were probably produced a few decades later. There is considerable wear to most areas of the gilding resulting from long and intensive use. The iconography of the five-pointed *vajra* corresponds to that seen on early Ming examples and the basic structure of the *ghanta* can be compared to other bells of that same period.³ The body of this *ghanta* displays a more schematic decoration such as *Dharma* Wheels, the symbols of Buddha Vairochana. The handle shows the face of this deity, which resides in the central position of the *Tathagata mandala*, shown wearing an eight-leaf diadem-shaped crown.

NOTES:

1. On the symbolism of *vajra* and *ghanta* as complementary ritual objects see Huntington/Bangdel 2003, p.220, no.58 and Snellgrove 1987, pp.131.
2. Huntington/Bangdel, op. cit., p.220.
3. For early Ming examples of bells with a cast reign mark inside the body see Thurman/Weldon 1999, pp.32, no.11; Bigler 2013, p.107, no.42, pp.109, no.43.

