

Buddhist Tantra: Visualisation Practices and Feminine Imagery

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Symbols cannot be studied apart from the references, which they symbolize.

- Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*
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The picture is not in colours...the Principle
(*tattvam*) transcends the letter.

- *Lankāvatār Sūtra*, II, 112 and
114²

Though in religions such as Buddhism, because of its non-theological framework, the presence of any supreme creator god or goddess is denied, however, the existence of divinities is well acknowledged within the religious structure of Buddhism.³ On

¹ Quoted by Ananda K Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972, xxi.

² *ibid*,

³ It is common belief amongst the scholars that the deities of Buddhist tantra are not accepted in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism. However, there exists significant presence of divinities within Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism. For details, see, Roger R. Jackson, "A Tantric Eco in Sinhalese Theravada? Piritta ritual, the book of Paritta and the Janapanjararaya." *Dhīh: A Review*

the ontological level, the existence of divinities is posited by the texts of Sutra as well as Tantra system of Buddhism.⁴ The higher versions of non-dual tantra posit these divinities to have a non-intrinsic nature. In *Hevajra-tantra*, the sentient beings and the Buddha are said to be essentially one.⁵ This essential of non-duality has continuing importance in the meditative visualization and ritualistic practices of tantra.⁶

These practices prescribe various means such as mantra recitations, yogic practices on bodily wind channels, fixating the mindstream in an exalted state of wisdom, and through elaborated and sophisticated rituals accompanied with liturgical implements such as visualisation of various types of imagery of deities in their elaborated iconographic forms.

In the tantric yogic practices, the imageries of goddesses are used as such implements for symbolic representation and a tool for

of Rare Buddhist Texts (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies) XVIII (1994), 121-140.

⁴ The Sutra system of Buddhism includes the Theravada and Mahayana Sutra as majority of Sutra literature is common for both the tradition. Only the sutra literature belonging to the class of *Prajñāparamitā*, which is not accepted by the Theravada tradition as a valid teaching of the Buddha, is additional to Mahayana tradition.

⁵ *Hevajra-tantram*, 127. The *Hevajra-tantra* says, 'The sentient beings are the Buddha. Nevertheless, the [difference is because of] adventitious impurity. When that [impurity] is removed, the sentient beings undoubtedly become the Buddha, (*satvā buddhā eva kintu āgantuk-malā-vṛitā, Tasyā- apkarṣaṇāt satvā buddhā eva na saṃśayaḥ*).

⁶ The tantra rituals begin with the invocation of this non-dual awareness by recitation and reflection of this mantra: 'ōm śūnyatā jñāna vajra svabhāva atmakoḥam' (I am of the essence of the nature of adamantine Emptiness –wisdom).

meditating upon the innate wisdom. Within the tantric Buddhist expressions, these goddesses represent some Buddhist concepts in an anthropomorphic form. Therefore, meditation based on visualisation of deities, in actuality is a reflection upon those philosophical insights. The icons of a deity just serve as a means to actualize and enhance the dynamics of the psychophysical reality of the practitioner.⁷

With the development of the tantric system, these practices have resulted in a structured form of pragmatic rituals and practices in the religious system of Buddhism, which consisted of techniques that tried to trigger one's individual energy to harmonize with the universal cosmic energy. Such practices were developed in various religious traditions in India. The concept behind these practices employs the macrocosm-microcosm homology, an idea of symmetrical contiguity between subjective-objective reality, where the practitioners unite their subjective nature of an individual with objective phenomenal effulgence. This is given in the expression, 'as without, so within' (*yathā bahyaṃ tathā-dhyātman*). It is quoted in a Buddhist tantra text, *Nispannayogāvalī*, compiled in the early 12th century CE by Abhayākaragupta.⁸

⁷ The description of the goddess Vajrayoginī says, 'Homage to you, Vajrayoginī! You hold a skull bowl and staff on your left as [wisdom of] Emptiness [and], a chopper in your right hand [as] compassion.' (*vāme kapalakhatvāṅge dakṣhiṇekartridharīṇi, śūnyā-karuṇāvahī Namaste vajrayoginī*). See, *Buddh-tantra-kośa*, 208.

⁸ *Nispanna-yogāvalī*, 26-27.

Early tantra traditions

It is generally accepted that the formalized form of psychic-yogic practices took concrete shape in *Yoga-sūtra* of Pātañjali, which was compiled in its present form around the 3rd century CE. However, it is evident from recent studies on *Yoga-sūtras* that the vocabulary of this text heavily draws upon Buddhist concepts and terminology, for explaining its practices and their subsequent attainments.⁹

The psychic-yogic practices have been part of ancient religious systems of India since a much earlier period. The archaeological artefacts obtained from Indus valley civilization have the three-headed figure of Paśupati that depicts yogic practices present at that time. The *Atharva Veda* has the reference to yogic practices and role of *prāṇa* (vital-breath) within the body. If we accept the several stone statues of female figures found at the Indus valley sites, usually dated around 2500 BCE, as goddesses statue, as do many scholars, this would add another dimension of early feminine worship in the Indian subcontinent, which is intimately connected with the *Yoginī-tantra* tradition.

The philosophical schools that were developed in the post-Vedic period, often exhibit a tendency to explore and comprehend the mysteries of the phenomenal world in its entirety. These systems often advocate omniscience and

⁹ It is evident from the recent researches that Patañjali has successfully adapted the terminology of Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism. For more details, see Philipp A. Maas, *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma and the Yoga of Patañjali*, accessed on 1 October 2014.

omnipotence as a necessary attribute of any perfect being. In the post-Vedic period, as it is evident from the literature of Purāṇa, Shaivite tradition literature and Mahayana literature, some philosophical systems were frequently making use of psycho-yogic techniques as a means to achieve this omniscience and omnipotence.

As these schools often proclaimed their roots to be some specific and well-established older system of Vedic or non-Vedic philosophical system, they had to enter into a dialogue or debate with other schools of Indian philosophy.

This way, these schools got their prominence amongst the masses and accepted the modalities and rules of their time, and established themselves in the strata of social normality.¹⁰

Such approaches led to the development of a coherent system that was formalised and structured. This was happening in many religious systems of medieval India. This system was termed 'tantra', and it was concerned with different modes of disciplined and systematic methods for training and controlling the mind-body complex and

reshaping the human consciousness towards a higher spiritual goal.

In the Buddhist system, the tantric tradition has been primarily part of Mahayana and its spiritual goal is not intended just for one's personal salvation.¹¹ The texts prescribing the tantric rituals and practices emphasised the altruistic intention for its practitioners.¹²

As the tantric movement gained popularity around 6th century CE in northern and central India, every religion had its own form of a tantric system. Around the eighth and 9th century CE, the phenomenon of tantra traditions could be observed in all the religious traditions in India, which incorporate esoteric practices, deities, mantras, and other occult elements that also included the transgressive practices as its means.

Mostly, modern scholars have classified Buddhism into three divisions wherein Tantrayana or Vajrayana is considered as the third major *yāna*, alongside Theravada and Mahayana. However, the traditional

¹⁰ In the West, most scholars have not recognised these unique and peculiar components of India's philosophical and religious scenario developed from medieval times onward. Scholars such as Georg Feurstein incautiously remark, 'Tantrism's contribution to philosophy is negligible. Its unicity lies wholly within the practical sphere, the *sādhana*. From a philosophical point of view, there is no hiatus between Tantrism and previous traditions.' For detailed discussion see, Raffaele Torella, "Importance of Utpaladeva: An Introduction." In *Utpaladeva, Philosopher of Recognition*, edited by Raffaele Torella and Bettina Bäumer, 1-13. Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2016, 1.

¹¹ Traditionally, the personal liberation or Nirvana is the primary aim of Sravaka-yana, which comprises the Theravada tradition. Although the scholars such as G. C. Pandey have argued that the practices such as Vipassana do indicate that, the tantra practice has been part of Theravada tradition too.

¹² The invoking verse that is recited before any Buddhist tantric practice included statements such as, 'I generate the altruistic mind for my full awakening, for the benefit of all sentient beings.' ('...*bodhi-cittam karomyeṣa, sva-prārtha prasiddhaye*'). We find this line in the starting paragraphs of many *Sādhana*s of the *Sādhana-mālā*, a compendium of tantra practices, compiled by the abbot of Vikramsila monastery. Abhayākara-gupta, in the 11th century CE. See various *Sādhana*s mentioned in the *Sādhana-mālā*.

classification, as done by Advayavajra (978-1053 CE) in *Advaya-vajra-sangraha* suggests the two-fold division of Mahayana: Pāramitānaya — the Sutra vehicle, and Mantranaya — the Tantra vehicle.¹³

Since 7th-8th century CE onwards, the Buddhist Siddhas (tantric adepts) have played a key role in popularising the Vajrayana or the tantra tradition. These wanderers were a combination of saint, eclectic scholar, and behaved like lunatics. They helped imbue Buddhism with a renewed spirit of vigour and enthusiasm. Siddhas chose to live outside the monastic communities and often mocked institutionalised Buddhism. In their unorthodox teachings, they ridiculed the conventional mode of human behaviour. Although many types of research on them have alleged them to be corrupt libertines, the true Siddhas were simply using unorthodox and radical means to achieve the ultimate state of supreme gnosis, what they called *Sahaja*. The miraculous yogic powers displayed by these Siddhas seems to have played a big role in popularizing the tantra tradition amongst the common masses.

Many references to magical and occult elements can also be found in Pali sources. This indicates towards the inclination of some of Buddha's disciples towards miraculous yogic practices. In Pali tradition, a class of literature known as *Paritta* (protection), such as *Āṭānāṭiya*

Sutta, *Ratana Sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya* has a close resemblance with the protective Dharaṇī literature of the Buddhist tantra. In *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta*, a protection spell recited on the Gṛidhakūṭa hill of Rajagriha in presence of the Buddha, one of the directional demigods named Vaiśravaṇa is sought after for protection in the recitation.¹⁴ Vaiśravaṇa retains his status of protective deity (Tib: *mGon po*) in Tibetan Buddhism.

Around the 2nd century CE, when the scholastic tradition of Mahayana was its growing phase, it also had a parallel tradition of protection-incantation literature known as *dhāraṇī*. The Mahayana Sutras such as *Suvarṇa-prabhās* and *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* have a large corpus of literature containing *dhāraṇī* and *mantra*.¹⁵ The literature of *dhāraṇī* and *mantra* consisted of the verbal formulas that were believed to have sonically charged and their utterance could help to achieve a broad range of pragmatic and salvific goals.

The *dhāraṇī* literature frequently consisted of the vocabulary of proto-Sanskrit or Dravidian language. Most *dhāraṇī* have a plausible meaning within the tradition. The Buddhist *dhāraṇī*, ‘..inne minne dapper daḍapphe’, is supposed to articulate the four Noble truth in Dravidian language.¹⁶

¹⁴ See, *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta*.

¹⁵ These carefully structured verbal utterances are recited in conjunction with ritual practices or visualization in order to produce the desired effect. This intrinsic efficacy is attributed to their phonetic structure. This is applicable to mantras of Hindu and Jaina tradition too.

¹⁶ Robert A. Yelle, *Explaining Mantras*. New York & London: Routledge, 2003, 11.

¹³ Mahayana has two verities, Pāramitānaya and Mantranaya (*mahāyanam ca dvividham, pāramitānayo, mantranayaśceti*) quoted in *Advayavajrasangraha*, 14.

Another variety of *mantra*, known as seed syllable mantra (*bīja mantra*) was the phonemes without any specific meaning but supposedly consisted of a blueprint of the iconographic details of tantric deities. The repetitive utterance of seed syllables was supposed to lead the practitioner to the manifestation of the perceptual image of a tantric deity.

The seed-syllables (*bīja-mantra*) of these deities are believed to inherit their complete iconographic details in an abstract form. After certain numbers of contentious repetition of the seed-syllable of a particular deity, the practitioner can have the direct access of the detailed iconic visualization of that deity.

In the Mahayana Sutras and Tantras, it had been proclaimed that the mantras and the practices related to tantras were derived directly from the teachings of historical Buddha.¹⁷ The dating of compilation of tantric literature varies from 1st century CE to 10th century CE. This was the time when Mahayana Buddhism was in prominence. Owing to the remarkable efforts of the masters of monastic universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila, the tantra initially being an obscure tradition within restricted circles of adepts, started emerging into the open.

¹⁷ *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* and *Manjuśrīmūlakalpa* mention that the Buddha preached the doctrine of *mantra* on different occasions, to selected disciples. See, *Pradīpodyotana*, 16. In the commentaries of *Kālacakra-tantra*, it is said that the Sambhogakāya form of Buddha preached the tantra simultaneously while the Nirmaṇakāya of Buddha was preaching the Mahayana at two different geographical locations.

Several Sutras were compiled around this period, which was supposedly the concealed canonical literature of Mahayana. From the traditional perspective, tantra texts were not created or written in later period as it has been presumed by modern historians. They are believed to be the direct teachings of historical Buddha and they were compiled by the Bodhisattva Vajrapani, immediately after the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha.

In this literature, the philosophical principles were symbolically depicted through a personified form of a deity or a Bodhisattva. Some of the texts also portrayed them with a *Mandala* (cosmic diagram) consisting of the retinue of central deity.

From 7th century CE to 12th century CE, tantric Buddhism continued to develop through various Siddhas who encoded their practices and composed mystical songs known as *Caryā-gīti* (songs of tantric conducts) and *Caryā-pada* (passages of tantric conducts) which was later compiled in a text called *Dohā-Koṣa* (Treasury of verses). These songs of *Caryā-gīti* were also an integral part of esoteric and ritualistic dance system named *Carya-nṛtya* (dance of tantric conduct).

Another distinguishing feature of this phase of Buddhism was the adoption of the language of the common masses. The language of *Caryā-gīti* and *Caryā-pada* written by the Siddhas were not Sanskrit but Prakrit or the *Apabhramsa* (local vernacular). Their teachings also had a great influence on contemporary monastic

universities such as Nalanda and Vikramshila.

During this period, tantric Buddhism also made its advent in Tibet and Southeast Asia and assimilated their local practices and deities into it. Buddhism in this period had an all-embracing nature and incorporated several indigenous traditions, however, this assimilation was done without compromising with the basic Buddhist tenets. The Buddhist textual sources suggest that the esotericism was already inherent in the scriptures of the early Buddhist period. Some of the earliest records of esoteric rituals can be found in non-tantric literature such as

Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra of Arya Maitreya, *Yogacārabhūmiśāstra*, including *Bodhisattvabhūmī* and *Śrāvakaḥbhūmī* of Arya Asanga, written in the 3rd century CE.¹⁸ The benedictory verse of *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, another 3rd century CE text attributed to Arya Maitreya, has a eulogy to goddess Prajñāpāramitā, who is a well-celebrated deity in Buddhist tantra.¹⁹ This verse of *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* is:

¹⁸ Karunesh Shukla, *Gleanings from the Buddhist Heritage*. New Delhi: Readworthy Publications, 2013, 109-110.

¹⁹ It is noted that the benedictory verse of *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* is dedicated to goddess, *Prajñāpāramitā*, who is ascribed as 'the mother of Buddhas'. She is also a foremost deity in Buddhist tantra tradition.

¹⁹ *Yā sarva-gyatayā nayatya-upasamam śāntaiśiṅghā śrāvakān
Yā mārga-gyatayā jagaddhīta-kṛitā lokārth sampādikā
Sarvakāram vadanti munayo viśvasya yā sangatā
Tasyai śrāvaka-bodhisattava-gaṇīno buddhasya matre namah. See:
Abhisamayālamkāra with Vṛtti and Aloka*. Maitreya, Translated by Gareth Sparham. California: Jain Publishing House, 2015, 1-2. Also, in, *Buddha-stotra-saṅgraha*, 66.

‘Through the knowledge of all, she leads the Hearers who seek pacification and complete peace. Through the knowledge of paths, she enables those who benefit the sentient beings to bring about the welfare of the world. And through being endowed with her, the omniscient sages can set forth varieties of teachings, having all aspects. I prostrate to the mother of the Buddhas and all of the Hearers and Bodhisattvas.’

Similarly, the ending *dhāriṇī* of the *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛīdaya-sūtra* – although it does not belong to tantra literature – shows a tendency towards the development of the mantra tradition. Although the Buddhist tantra had its foundation in Mahayana philosophy, however, it laid more emphasis on the practice than on philosophy. The Mahayana Sutras were important to tantra too however, the tantra system laid emphasis on the practices which contained esoteric yogic contemplative practices.²⁰

Guhyasamāja-tantra claims that the reason why it had not been preached before was that there was no one sufficiently learned to understand it.²¹ This

²⁰ The practices that distinguish the tantric form of Buddhism are related to visualizations on the 'clear light' nature of mind or control over the wind channels.

²¹ Haridas Bhattacharyya, *The Cultural Heritage of India: The Religions*. Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1956, 268.

also indicates that tantric Buddhism happened to be a finer version of Mahayana.

The language of symbolism, icons and semiotics were used extensively to illustrate the concepts of Tantric Buddhism. The symbolic union of male and female figures represented the *prajñā* (intuitive wisdom) was considered to be a passive female quality of human nature while the *upāya* (skilful means) such as compassionate action was the male quality and a union of both in the process of enlightenment was represented by an ecstatic union of male and female deities. Such symbolism implied that a similar union of the male and female mode could be experienced on a higher plane of consciousness where all opposites appear in dynamic unity.

In its practical aspect, tantra uses a variety of methods to achieve this stage. It consists of a set of spiritual techniques that gradually take the consciousness of the practitioner to a nondual liberating state. Preliminary tantric practices emphasize the external purity of the body, speech, and mind. The body in a correct meditation posture is visualized as a virtual shrine where offerings are made and *mudrās* (hand gestures) are performed. Speech is used for reciting mantras while the mind is used for contemplating upon the deity and imprinting itself with the visual form of deity. The deity here represents some philosophical idea in an anthropomorphic form. As practitioners invoke the quality of the deity, they try to awaken similar features within them.

In Tantric Buddhism at the primary level, the approach is that of having control over sensual desires. However, at a higher level, a revolutionary approach of not subjugating but exploring a psychological path of transformation of desire into spiritual bliss is followed. This is achieved through a tantric-yogic process of manipulating subtle wind channels that act as a link between the body and the mind. In the higher stages, the use of transgressive practices associated with the cremation ground and so forth, are recommended in tantric texts such as the *Hevajra-tantra* and the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* for achieving an insight of nondual wisdom.

It is suggested that in tantra at certain transitional states, such as meditation and dreaming, the body-mind is in a very subtle state that can be used by advanced practitioners to transform the mindstream. Thus, by changing the gear of consciousness, the practitioner accelerates the process of enlightenment. These transitional states are used for penetrating deep inside the human psyche. Tantra recommends transgressive actions in order to take apart the sense of duality, that is, any knowledge of good and evil and making the mind free from any sort of conditioning. Such concepts of tantra connote the idea of *Śūnyatā* (emptiness) that alone exists, beyond good or evil, and the tantric practitioner must act only with compassion for the benefit of the salvation of the world.

Thus, tantric practices are designed in a way to process the dismantling, the

‘conditioned known’ and getting to *Sahaja* (effortless equipoise), the last achievement of all thought perceiving every phenomenon as pure and non-inherent.²² Such ideologies can be commonly found in the verses of the eighty-four *Mahasiddhas* (great adepts) of tantric Buddhism, who claimed to be in a state of *Sahaja*.

Misunderstandings of tantra and its practices

Misapprehension of the teachings of Buddha has been a subject of concern since the very beginning of Buddhism. The biographical accounts of the Buddha in *Apādāna sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya* of Pali tradition and the Sanskrit Sutra *Lalitavistara* of Mahayana tradition have statements about this apprehension of the Buddha.²³ In the philosophical expositions such as *Mūlamādhyamika-kārikā* of Nagarjuna of 2nd Century CE and other commentaries on *Śūnyatā* warns its reader about the danger of falling into the nihilistic interpretation of *Śūnyatā*.²⁴ This concern of misinterpretation of Buddha’s teaching is very much evident in all of the tantric texts.

Traditionally the practice of tantra is supposed to be kept secret. Because of this, tantra has often been subjected to a great deal of misunderstanding. The early

research on tantra have wrongly positioned it in the mode of immoral worship because of its repulsive outward sign and an incomprehensible meaning for an uninitiated person.

All tantra texts warn about its secrecy and put restrictions on the independent practice of tantra in the absence of a qualified guru. The texts clearly state that teachings should not be revealed to those who are not initiated and who lack faith. Thus, public accessibility to authentic tantric teachings is limited.

In recent decades, some of the Tibetan Buddhist lamas have been more willing to bestow initiations and impart commentary on tantric *sādhanas* and scholars in the academic world have begun compiling and translating tantric teachings and texts. H. H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s advice of partially lifting the secrecy – in order to avoid the great misunderstandings – has made the written commentary on some of the secret practices readily available to the academic world.²⁵

Interpretation of Tantra by Western scholars

Early research on Buddhist tantra mainly focused on the socio-religious aspect and viewed it more as a magical cult and rituals. Books authored by Herbert V. Guenther, David Snellgrove, and Alex Wayman are valuable accounts of Buddhist tantric traditions practised in Tibet and other Himalayan regions in India.

²² A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999, 140.

²³ In Pali *Dīgha Nikāya*, this concern is mentioned in the *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, 213-215. In a Mahayana Sutra, named *Lalitavistara*, it is mentioned in *Adhyeṣaṇa-parivarta*. See, *Lalitavistara*, 754-755.

²⁴ Nagarjuna in his *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, has often warned against the nihilistic interpretation of S this. See, chapter 13, verse 8, of *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*.

²⁵ *Vajrayogini Sadhna and Commentary*, vii.

The works of Indian authors such as P. C. Bagchi and N. N. Bhattacharyya are also helpful in understanding different tantric traditions in India. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Benoytosh Bhattacharyya were amongst the earliest indigenous scholars of Buddhist art and iconography. While Ananda Coomaraswamy focused on the idealistic–philosophical aspects of Buddhist art, Benoytosh Bhattacharyya dealt with the iconography of tantric deities and also edited *Niṣpannayogāwālī* and two volumes of *Sādhanamālā* manuscripts obtained from Nepal. In recent years, the voluminous works of Lokesh Chandra have also contributed to the research of Tibetan and Nepalese iconography. However, the difficulty with these researchers, who are established scholars, research is that they do not have any real experience of tantra as practitioners. Their explanations about tantric concepts are based on textual accounts. Scholars such as Benoytosh Bhattacharyya have admitted their limitations in this regard.²⁶ Largely, much of tantra that we talk about today is a product of the late 19th and 20th century Hindu and Buddhist renaissance in which Western ideas about science, psychoanalysis, and mental fitness play a crucial role. In the last decade, tantra has also come to the centre of a much larger debate on the politics of scholarship and

the interpretation of South Asian traditions.²⁷

With the development of psychoanalysis, researchers on tantra have tried to establish a rational basis for its erotic-yogic practices.²⁸ Nevertheless, the tantric erotic yoga practice is considered to be a very advanced meditative practice.²⁹ It has almost no resemblance to everyday lovemaking. It is supposed to be an intense meditative and yogic religious ritual, which has never been a part of any Buddhist monastic establishment. There have been stories of expulsions and severe punishments given to the monastics for violating the monastic code of celibacy. The present practice manuals of Anuttara-yoga tantra, published with authoritative commentary by contemporary Tibetan masters clearly state that ‘at this time of degeneration, the practices have been reduced to a mere recitation of the words of the *sadhana*’.³⁰ In some cases where an

²⁶ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, “Bauddha Sadhna.” In *Kalyaan Sadhana Ank*, edited by Hanuman Prasad Poddar. Gorakhpur, Gita Press, 1940: 637.

²⁷ A number of Western scholars and their books such as Jeffrey Kripal's *Kali's Child* (1998), David Gordon White's *Kiss of the Yogini* (2003) and Sarah Caldwell's *Oh Terrifying Mother* (1999) have received strong criticism from some Indian readers for their allegedly hypersexual and neo-orientalist interpretations of tantra.

²⁸ Louise Child, *Tantric Buddhism and the Altered State of Consciousness*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007, 5-23.

²⁹ It is observed by scholars that mostly, the popular books on tantra that present the ‘secrets of tantric sex’ are not different from a traditional sex manual and they hardly reflect any concern with the true objective of the tantras. For a detailed discussion, see, James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 158-159.

³⁰ For details see, Sharpa Tulku and Richard Guard, *Self-initiation of Vajrabhairava*. Dharamshala:

erotic union is explicitly mentioned, (such as the Secret-Initiation (*Guhya-abhiṣeka*) and Wisdom-Initiation (*prajñā-abhiṣeka*), as mentioned in the Vajra-bhairava initiation ritual), the practitioners are directed to visualize the practice.³¹ The practitioner is allowed to go for actual practice only if he could, through his meditative yogic concentration, exhibit his power over controlling the ontological reality; needless to say that such advanced practitioner visibly non-existent in the contemporary times.

However, in the manner in which these practices are presented or prescribed in the Buddhist scriptures; they have the high potential to mislead the practitioners and to be misused in the name of Buddhist tantra. As Miranda Shaw reports that while she was researching her book on women in Tantric Buddhism, several Tibetan lamas approached her with offers of a 'tantric sexual relationship', when in fact they actually knew little or nothing about those practices.³²

Neo-tantra movements and the Occult paradigm of Vajrayana Buddhism

Propagators of Indian occult science institutions such as Theosophy Society have put forward their rationalizations for their mysterious meditative practices that have been widely used by and the followers of neo-tantra movements. One such movement was propagated by Osho (formally known as Rajneesh). Osho's

Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1991, vii-viii.

³¹ *ibid.*, 50-51.

³² Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, 175.

commentary on several Buddhist tantric texts has played an important role in popularizing Buddhist tantra and generated a new readership for it. Similarly, Tibetan tantric master Chögyam Trungpa's 'Crazy Wisdom' tantra teachings have led to the evolution of a new generation of tantric Buddhist scholars.³³ Trungpa also warned about the dangers of tantra practices and advised them not to rush to them. Some of Trungpa's students, later on, tried to give a feminist face to the Buddhist tantra.³⁴ In recent years, the encouragement given by H. H. Dalai Lama to explore Tibetan Buddhism has given the outside world an opportunity to investigate the rational basis of tantric practices. In this way, a massive multi-level hybridization has taken place in the recent decade and mystical aspects of tantric practices have been rationalized to some extent.

Feminine divine in the feminist framework

Because of the rapidly increasing modern interest in Buddhist tantras, a number of works related to this subject have been published. Some impressive studies on tantric goddesses have also appeared. These studies tend to range across other

³³ 'Crazy wisdom' is a term coined by Chögyam Trungpa, an iconoclast Tibetan Lama, who came to teach Buddhism to young Americans in the 1970s. He described 'Crazy wisdom' as unconventional and shocking pedagogical methods, used as a 'skillful means', intended to awaken the students from their ignorance. See, Chogyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa*. Edited by Carolyn Rose Gimian. Vol. 10. Boston & London: Shambhala, 2017.

³⁴ Trungpa's students include the feminist scholar such as Rita M. Gross, Simmer S. Brown, and others.

academic disciplines also; notably, the image of the yoginī or Dākinī has inspired a large body of cross-cultural and feminist theological discourse.

Many writers have drawn upon Buddhist thought in their articulations of feminist epistemology. Rita M. Gross's *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993), examines the feminist history of Buddhism, Tsultrim Allione's *Women of Wisdom* (2000) searches for the spiritual potential of women in Tibetan Buddhism, Judith Simmer Brown's *Dākinī's Warm Breath* (2001) interweaves traditional stories of the feminine divine with commentaries by contemporary teachers. Similarly, June Campbell's *Traveller in Space* (2003) is about the female identity in Tibetan Buddhism, Serinity Young's *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts* (2004) tackles a complex issue of sexuality and gender by examining textual and historical data. Miranda Shaw's *Passionate Enlightenment* (2004) argues against the subordinate role of women in tantric Buddhism. She argues that historical records are androcentric and biased. She presents extensive evidence of independent female founders of tantric traditions and their role in establishing a distinctive vision of gender relations within the tantric tradition.

Most of these books have been published in the last two decades and they draw on feminist perspective and tantric sources to pursue questions related to the construction of women's subjectivity within the Buddhist framework. Feminine aspects of the Indo-Tibetan culture of Buddhism are although well researched in

these books, however as it has been pointed out by Rita M. Gross, '[S]uch discussions cannot be done by outsiders, no matter how knowledgeable and sympathetic they may be.'³⁵

Apart from these researchers, which generally rely on Tibetan sources, works by John Locke, David Gellner and Todd T. Lewis have opened up a new discourse on contemporary Mahayana and Vajrayana ritualism and culture of Nepal. By highlighting the 'popular religion' facet of Buddhism which includes a large degree of practices related to the imagery of goddesses, they examine the ethnographical aspects of rituals, myths and devotional rites practised by the lay Buddhist community in Nepal.

Research on goddesses of early Buddhism

When we investigate the goddess practice in Buddhism, we find that there exists a vast inconsistency between textual and material evidence, as they do not corroborate each other. The primacy that has been granted to textual sources, despite their obscure nature, creates a further problem.

The golden plaque bearing a naked figure of a goddess obtained along with the relics from stupa of Piprahwa (Kapilvastu) and the Lauria-Nandangarh Stupa (West Champaran) and the voluptuous female figures that have been carved around the *vihāras* do not have much verifiable

³⁵ Rita M. Gross, "Is the Goddess a Feminist?" In *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, edited by Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl. New York: NYUP, 2000, 109.

canonical evidence.³⁶ However, their presences do imply that Buddhism, since its inception, had a rich tradition of goddesses.

Golden plaque of a goddess of 2nd-3rd BCE

37

(Obtained from Lauria-Nandangarh Stupa in West Champaran, Bihar)



It is a general assumption made by the modern scholars that in the early phase of Buddhism, these goddesses from pre-Buddhist traditions were inherited and were propitiated by the lay Buddhist followers.

Female divinities have had associations with different tantric sects for a long time. It is interesting to see that a fifth-century CE Vaiṣṇava inscription in a temple in Mandsaur, which contains one of the earliest archaeological references to tantra, mentions the existence of religious traditions related to *Dākinī*.³⁸ This inscription implies that the cremation grounds and mountainous regions were the loci of powerful female spirits such as *Dākinīs*.

Some of the stone sculptures of seven wrathful mother goddesses (*sapta-mātrika*) have been found in the archaeological remnants of the ancient monastic university of Nalanda, which is now preserved in the Provincial Museum at Lucknow.³⁹ It is interesting to note that the

³⁶ Munish Chandra Joshi, "Etiḥāsik Sandarbh Mein Śhakta Tantra." Edited by Krishnadutt Paliwal. *Hiranand Shastri Smarak Vyakhyan Mala*. Delhi: Sasta Sahitya Mandal, 2011, 41.

³⁷ Golden plaque of a goddess, 2nd-3rd BCE, Obtained from Lauria-Nandangarh Stupa in West Champaran, Bihar. (photograph © www.museumsofindia.com)

³⁸ David N. Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism*. Edited by Pranabananda Jash. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006, 71.

³⁹ Hiranand Sastri, "Nalanda and its Epigraphic Material." www.southasiaarchive.com. (accessed January 10, 2017), 115.

11th-century tantra text *Sādhanamālā* mentions about Buddhist goddess Mahāpratisarā, who subdues these seven mother goddesses (*sapta-mātrādi-devatā-santrāsa-kārī*).⁴⁰

The aim of practices related to such semi-divinities, which was prevalent in the popular or folk religion, was to gain access over the power of these terrible female spirits by delighting them with transgressive offerings and inducing them to serve the practitioner's own interests.

Ḍākinī and Yakṣiṇī in Buddhism

One of the recurring themes in the hagiography of Buddhist masters of tantra, both Indian and Tibetan, is the appearance of semi-divine female beings, Ḍākinī, in their visions.⁴¹ For instance, the accounts of the life of Naropa (10th-11th century CE), a monastic scholar from Vikramshila, tells that he had a vision of Ḍākinī where she cautioned him about the limitations of mere pedagogic knowledge of scriptures.⁴² Similarly, the Tibetan master Milarepa (1040-1123 CE) has acknowledged receiving instructions from several Ḍākinī in his visions.⁴³

The mention of several *Yakṣiṇī-sādhanā* in *Manjuśrīmūlakalpa*, a text of Kriyā and Caryā-tantra compiled around 5th-6th century CE, is an example of such practices prevailing in this phase of tantric Buddhism.⁴⁴

Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna, a part of *Divyāvadāna*, which is Sanskrit text belonging to Mūlasarvāstivāda school of Buddhism compiled around early 1st century CE, mentions the popularity of *dhāraṇī* (incantation) of goddesses.⁴⁵ These Dhāraṇī-Goddesses were the deification of some protective incantations that were practised as a form of sorcery by people.

The narrative of *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* mentions about *Dhāraṇī* of 'amale-vimale' being practised by a *Mātaṅga* woman who used it for bewitchment of Ananda, one of the favourite disciple of the Buddha.⁴⁶ The narrative also indicates that practitioners who belonged to the lower stratum of ancient Indian society often dispensed these forms of sorcery practices. This form

⁴⁰ *Sādhanamālā*, 407.

⁴¹ These female divinities in the form of women are often identified as 'Dakini' (sky travellers), a Sanskrit term describing female deities or actual female consorts of male practitioners. In the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that these Dakinis help the visionary lamas to discover the *terma* (treasure texts or objects), through their physical manifestations as female consorts.

⁴² Herbert Guenther, *The Life & Teachings of Naropa*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1963, 24-25.

⁴³ gTsang-sMyon, He-ru-ka, *The Biography of The Great Yogi Milarepa*. Translated by Ramesh Chandra Negi. Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2003, 257-70.

⁴⁴ Miranda Shaw, "Magical Lovers, Sisters, and Mothers." In *Breaking Boundaries With the Goddesses*, edited by Cynthia Ann Humes and Rachel Fell McDermott, 265-296. Delhi: Manohar, 2009, 74-75.

⁴⁵ Scholars such as Alex Wayman (Alex Wayman, "An Historical Review of Buddhist Tantra." *Dhīh: A Review of Rare Buddhist Texts* (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies XX, 1995: 137-53) have pointed out the association of Mahayana with the *dhāraṇī*. As there are chapters on *dhāraṇī* found in the *Saddharmapundarika-sūtra* and *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*. The term 'proto-tantric' was used to describe the literature and practices related to Buddhist *dhāraṇī*. Ronald Davidson, in his works thinks that 'proto-tantric' term is 'somewhat misleading.' See: Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 368.

⁴⁶ *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*, 4-5.

of sorcery-practice is admittedly doctrinally alien to Buddhism; however, the textual source states that the Buddha recited a similar incantation of ‘*andare-panḍare*’ as the remedy to counter the evil caused on Ananda.

It can be observed that female spirits were an integral part of the religious life of early India and later on, they were accommodated in different religious traditions. That is why in the later period when tantra appeared in its mature form, it used metaphors from earlier traditions and gave the utmost importance to female divinities.

Female deities in non-Buddhist tantric systems

Some of the practices related to female deities were common in different traditions. For example, the practice of Goddess Śrī, which is still popular in the Hindu sphere in southern India, seems to have existed at the time of the Buddha or even prior to that. The Jain literature states that Mahavira’s mother had an auspicious dream of Śrī prior to the Tīrthankara’s birth.⁴⁷ Around the 1st century CE, Śrī attained prominence in Buddhism. She is depicted in the relief works of Sanchi and Bharhut. *Sādhanamālā* mentions *Aparājitā-sādhana*.⁴⁸ Her reference appears in *Lalitāsahtranām* and in *Jaina-Rūpa-Maṇḍana* as one of the forms of the great goddess.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Joshi, “Eitihāsik Sandarbh Mein Śhakta Tantra”, 40.

⁴⁸ *Sādhanamālā*, 403.

⁴⁹ *Jaina-Rupa-Mandana*, 285.

In *Harivamsa-purāṇa* there are hymns for a mother goddess who holds a peacock feather in her hand.⁵⁰ She can be identified with one of the Pañcarakṣā goddess, Mahāmāyūrī.⁵¹ In *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa* a mantra of Buddhist goddess Kurūkullā is recommended for protection from snakes.⁵² Several sites of such goddesses can still be identified in various parts of India where Buddhist goddesses are very popular among the Hindus.

The confluence of tantra traditions of Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, and Buddhism during the Pala period, provided the ground in which of female deities sprouted.⁵³ Some overlapping female deities of Buddhist and Shakta tantra, such as goddess Chhinnamundā, are mentioned in *Sādhanamālā*, a text compiled during this period.⁵⁴

Another tantric Buddhist text, *Cakrasamvara-tantra*, also has some similarity with the non-dual Shaivite tantra practices. According to this tantric text, the absolute reality is empty in the ultimate form, it manifests into female and male aspects. The text further states that the male aspect cannot act without the female

⁵⁰ Joshi, “Eitihāsik Sandarbh Mein Śhakta Tantra”, 55.

⁵¹ Pranshu Samdarshi, “Concept of Goddesses in Buddhist Tantra Tradition.” Edited by Harish Trivedi. *The Delhi University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* (University of Delhi) 1, no. 1 (2014), 93.

⁵² *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa*, 68.

⁵³ Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2008, 33.

⁵⁴ *Sādhanamālā*, 453-456.

principal.⁵⁵ This concept is resonated in the first verse of Shankaracharya's *Saundaryalaharī* where primordial power is hypostatized as goddess Shakti and without her, Shiva is ineffectual.⁵⁶ In Shakta tantric traditions, the goddess ultimately becomes the primary, all-powerful creator, and sustainer of the cosmos.

It is important to note that early tantric traditions were diverse in nature. Most of them had a preoccupation with a powerful goddess, but the understanding, interpretation, and application of concepts developed in quite different ways. For example, in Shaivite traditions, the male deity was supreme with a powerful but ultimately subordinate consort.⁵⁷ In Vaishnava Pancharātra tradition, Lakṣmi as a consort of the god, appears in the twofold dynamic power, Bhūti and Kriyā.⁵⁸ The Bhūti aspect of Lakṣmi causes the formation of matter and material world while the Kriyā aspect of Lakṣmi vitalizes and governs the world.

Divine feminine and Female Buddhas

It can be observed the Shaiva, Vaishnava and Jaina tantric traditions give less importance to female divinities as compared with their male counterparts.

However, Shakta tantra places the goddess in a supreme position. In Buddhist tantra, which is similar to Shakta, the superiority of goddesses comes across in a substantial way. Moreover, in Buddhist tantra tradition, one of the fourteen 'root downfalls' from the *Samaya* vows are caused by the denigration of women. Therefore, for every tantra practitioner of Buddhism has to abstain from any sort of disrespect of the women as they represent the wisdom aspect of Buddhahood.

In the *Abhisamayalankāra*, a commentary on *Prajñāpāramitā* sutra written by Arya Asanga in the 3rd Century CE, the transcendental wisdom was conceived as *Prajñāpāramitā* goddess, in a personified form of 'the mother of all Buddhas'.⁵⁹ The goal of practices dedicated to such goddesses assured the practitioners that they would be led to Buddhahood during the present lifetime.⁶⁰

This way the tantric Buddhism places some of these female deities at the pinnacle of the pantheon, who personify the highest spiritual goals including Buddhahood. Such female Buddhist divinities are nowadays popularly tagged as 'Female Buddhas', a term coined by modern authors such as G. H. Mullin and Miranda Shaw.⁶¹ However, due to its cultural baggage, the word 'Buddha' still

⁵⁵ J. Simmer Brown, *Dakini's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston: Shambhala, 2001, 46.

⁵⁶ First *śloka* of *Saundaryalaharī* states, '*Shivaḥ śaktyā yukto yadi bhavati śaktaḥ prabhavitum, na cedevam devo na khalu kuśala spanditumapi*'.

⁵⁷ Hajari Prasad Dwivedi, *Madhyakālīn Dharm Sādhna*. Allahabad: Sahitya Bhawan, 1970, 78.

⁵⁸ Pratap P. Kumar, *The Goddess Lakṣmi: The Divine Consort in South Indian Vaiṣṇava Tradition*. Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997, 26.

⁵⁹ *Abhisamayalamkāra with Vṛtti and Aloka*. Maitreya. Translated by Gareth Sparham. California: Jain Publishing House, 2015, 1-2.

⁶⁰ Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006, 8.

⁶¹ G H, Mullin Jeff J Watt. *Female Buddhas: Women of Enlightenment in Tibetan Mystical Art*. New Mexico: Clear Light Books, 2003.

reflects a male figure in our minds, though the term is more concerned with the concept of awakening and therefore transcends gender.

Be it folk traditions or classical religion, the goddess finds a prominent position in all forms of religious traditions of India. Although tantric traditions of non-dual Shaivism, Pañcarātra, and Jainism give less importance to female divinities as compared to their male counterparts, however Shakta tantra and Kula and Krama traditions of non-dual Shaivism, places the goddess at the supreme position. In Buddhist tantra similar to Śāktism, the superiority of goddesses comes in a substantial way. However, in Buddhism, the concept of goddess appears against a background of non-theism, which means that there is no supreme creator as such, and religious symbols and doctrines are just the means to realize the unsurpassable truth of Emptiness.

The spectrum of goddesses in Buddhism is similar in type and role to other religions born on Indian soil. The Pali canon gives several accounts where varieties of supernatural beings participate in the life story of Buddha and his disciples and offer various forms of assistance. Among them are some female figures, the Mahāyaksinīs, who are said to have vowed to protect those who follow the Buddhist path.⁶² The depiction of female nature spirits can also be seen on some of the earliest known Buddhist monuments of Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amaravati.

⁶² Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 90.

The textual accounts of Jataka, *Mahāvāstu-avadāna* and *Divyāvadāna* indicate that some of Yakṣani and minor-goddesses have a pre-Buddhist origin and were incorporated Buddhism later.⁶³ In the Tibetan hagiographical accounts of Buddhist saints such as Aryadeva (1st-2nd century CE), the Yakṣani Subhaga supports him in his endeavours of spreading Buddhism in south India.⁶⁴

It created a triumph for the rise of worship of feminine divinities. The Female saviours and protectors were personified in Buddhist ideals and they subsequently got an entry in religious expression of Buddhist settings. Furthermore, with the rise of Vajrayana, the wisdom aspect of enlightenment was conceptualised to have a feminine form.

The incantations and texts were also personified as the tantric goddesses. Some goddesses, such as Prajñāpāramitā, who embodied supreme enlightenment, were designated as ‘the Buddhas’ or ‘the mother of all Buddhas’ (*jina-janamī*). The goal of practices dedicated to such goddesses assured the practitioner to lead to Buddhahood during their lifetime.

⁶³ Gail Hinich Sutherland, *Yaksha in Buddhism and Hinduism*. Delhi: Manohar, 1992, 138-145.

⁶⁴ *Chos-byung-zis-bris-nor-bu*, 11.



Yakṣī on the gateway of Sanchi Stupa
1st -2nd century CE⁶⁵

This way some of these goddesses were placed to the pinnacle of the Buddhist pantheon, as they personified the highest spiritual goals including the Buddhahood. Such female Buddhist divinities are nowadays popularly designated as ‘Female Buddhas’ a term coined by modern scholars of Buddhism.⁶⁶ The Buddhist pantheon is rich in a varied range of fascinating female divinities; these range from tree spirits to compassionate healers and from wrathful

protectresses to a cosmic mother of liberation. These female Buddhist divinities can be broadly grouped into two categories. The first represents cosmic power in a feminine form, the second represents the highest truth for the attainment of liberation. The goddesses of the second group are often tagged as the ‘Female Buddhas’.

This group includes Mahayana goddesses such as Prajñāpāramitā and tantric goddesses such as Vajrayoginī and Nairātmyā. The other group consists of goddesses who are invoked to accomplish a range of practical aims such as protection from diseases and enemies, the pursuit of knowledge, mental purification and for

⁶⁵ Photograph © Suresh Vasant

⁶⁶ Authors such as G. H. Mullin and Miranda Shaw are some foremost names.

promoting gradual progress towards awakening. The iconographic traits and rituals differ according to the contrasting roles and statuses of these goddesses.

Goddesses in the historical sources

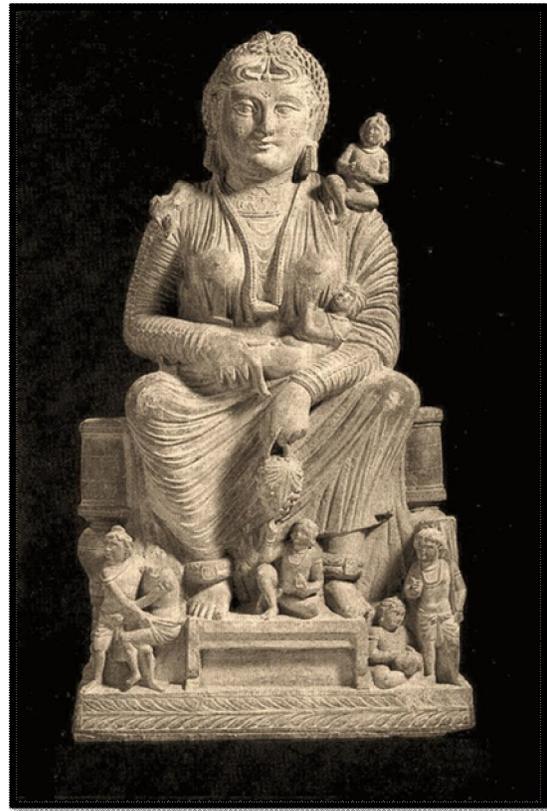
In the Vinaya texts of Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, that was popular around 3rd Century CE in Central Asia, we find *Mahāmāyūrī-sūtra* that points towards the all-embracing nature of Buddhism – the accommodation of local guardian spirits, the Yakṣha and Yakṣiṇī of several localities of the ancient Indian subcontinent, within the Buddhist framework.⁶⁷

The Chinese traveller I-tsing reports about the presence of statues of yakṣi Hārītī on the porches and in the dining halls in Indian monastic complexes.⁶⁸ Similarly, early Buddhist stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi have several reliefs depicting minor female figures as supernatural beings or tree spirits.

The encounter between the yakṣi Hārītī and the Buddha is an excellent example of the conversion of local goddesses to Buddhism.⁶⁹ The Buddha steps in to remove a supernatural threat that menaces at the request of the people of Magadha whose children were being killed by this ferocious goddess. After her encounter with the Buddha, Hārītī agrees to give the practice of devouring children and in

return, the Buddha promises her that she will be given sustenance from the portion of all the goods donated to *vihāras*. Thus, the Buddha quells the anger that drives the goddess's actions.

The Mahāvastu, a text of the Lokottaravāda School of early Buddhism, mentions about another yakṣi named Kunḍalā of Vaishali. Similar to the story of Hārītī, the wrath of Kunḍalā was pacified by the Buddha.⁷⁰ Tantric Buddhist texts such as *Manjuśrīmūlakalpa*, *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpannayogāvalī* feature a range of female divinities for specific areas of human needs.



Hārītī

2nd Century CE, Gandhara image⁷¹

⁶⁷ The *Mahāmāyūrī-sūtra* has the lists of yakṣhas and yakṣhis who are the guardians of different areas.

⁶⁸ Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 120-121.

⁶⁹ Ram Nath Misra, *The Yaksha Cult and Iconography*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1979, 73-77.

⁷⁰ *Mahāvastu*, 241-248.

⁷¹ Photograph © www.museumsofindia.com

On the one hand, they feature a range of powerful protectresses such as Sitātapatrā, a guardian against supernatural dangers; Jāṅguli who protects against harm by snakes and poison; and Parṇasāvāri, a healing deity. On the other hand, there are divinities for worldly benefits such as Vasuādhārā, who bestows the wealth and abundance; Uṣṇīsavijayā, who confers long life and a fortunate rebirth; and Cundā, who inspires and supports spiritual practices.

The protection spell of Mahāmāyūrī refers to a goddess who rides on peacocks. The peacock featured with her is thought to devour snakes in order to transform their poison into the shining colours of their rainbow-like feathers.

Tārā happens to be the most prominent female deity of Himalayan Buddhism. She is one of the principal examples of a female Buddha who actually achieved enlightenment. According to Tibetan tradition prior to her enlightenment, she was a Bodhisattva and was promised that after she reached awakening, she would always appear in a female form for the benefit of all living beings.⁷² Therefore, as a fully awakened Buddha in the tantra tradition, Tārā is invoked for attaining enlightenment.



Tārā on the wall of Mahabodhi temple ⁷³
(9th Century CE, Bodhgaya)

Tārā is visualised in her different emanations, such as Eka-jaṭā or Ugra-tārā, which are her wrathful forms (*raudra-rūpa*). Her benevolent (*saumya*) forms, White Tara (*Sīta-tārā*) and Green Tara (*Śyāma-tārā*), are still very popular amongst the Buddhist of Nepal and Tibet.

Feminine form of *Dhāraṇī*

A reference in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, compiled by 11th century CE master Abhyākaragupta from Vikramshila monastery, points that the many of the Buddhist goddesses are the embodiment of Buddhist *dhāraṇī* (incantation) literature.⁷⁴

⁷² Boker Rinpoche, *Tara The Feminine Divine*. San Francisco: Clear Point Press, 1999, 21.

⁷³ Photograph by author.

⁷⁴ *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, 190-191.

A reference of Cundā-dhāraṇī is given by the 8th century CE Nalanda scholar Shantideva.⁷⁵ The text *Niṣpannayogāvalī* acknowledges altogether twelve of such Dhāraṇī goddesses and gives their iconic descriptions.



Cundā ⁷⁶

9th Century CE, Sarnath, National Museum, Delhi

The deification of books has been an important part of the Mahayana system.

⁷⁵ Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, 120-122.

⁷⁶ Cundā, 9th Century CE, Sarnath, National Museum, Delhi (Photograph by author)

This practice of book-worship has played a major role in the development of early Mahayana and its institutional structure. The female deity Prajñāpāramitā is conceived as an embodiment of the ‘Perfection of Wisdom’ texts (*prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*). She is worshipped as a goddess in an anthropomorphic form which symbolizes the Mahayana scriptures known as the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. The *Dhāraṇī* literature is a particular kind of Buddhist works that is composed of a combination of semi-meaningful syllables. Some words of *Dhāraṇī* are overly repeated, which connotes to the forceful invocation of the deity or some emotive quality associated with her. Recitations of *Dhāraṇī* are believed to be so effective that they can alter the reality perceived by the practitioner who chants them faithfully, repeatedly, and continuously for a long time.

It is believed that the vibrations generated by the chanting of *Dhāraṇī* start to create a concrete perceptual formation of the deity, which is perceived by the practitioners. When this image starts appearing vividly, it is an indication of accomplishment (*siddhī*) of the practice (*sādhana*).

Contemplative practices and female deities

It is also commonly accepted in the tantric literature that the deities do not have a fixed form and they may appear as per the visualizations of the practitioner. The deities are referred to as mind-made formations (*manomaya-kāya*) of the practitioner’s own consciousness. Different forms and physical features of

these goddesses are symbolic and given in a coded language that is explained in tantric manuals. Depending on the specific enlightened qualities that they embody, the goddesses may have peaceful or wrathful appearances. The *sādhans* prescribed for these goddesses are meant to destroy or transform habits of the mind, often by unconventional methods.

Visualization is a major component of tantric practices. Most of the tantric goddesses are visualized with multiple heads, arms, and legs, representing the multifunctional nature of an enlightened mind, which they embody. They have key identifiers such as postures, hand gestures or symbols, and colours to tell who they are and what they represent.

As these goddesses embody Buddhist ideals, their iconic forms are created that are used as a tool for visualisation-based practices. The goddesses of higher tantra are portrayed with a backdrop of cremation ground. Their naked body is adorned with ornaments of bone. The flames around their body depict the yogic heat impassioned.

In most Buddhist tantric traditions, which are based on practices associated with goddesses, the feminine figure appears smaller, as compared to their male counterparts. However, there have been few exceptions such as the Green Tara Mandala of the 15th century, that has been found in the western Tibet.⁷⁷ In this

Mandala, the goddess is depicted in a dominant position with her consort, the celestial Buddha Amoghasiddhī. The union of two deities signifies the unity of wisdom and compassion.



Green Tārā with her consort Amoghasiddhī (15th Century CE, Tibet)⁷⁸

Another aspect of these goddesses is that, when they symbolise the wisdom (*prajñā*) aspect of enlightenment, they are often depicted in an erotic embrace with a male figure who represents the skilful-means (*upāya*). For the practitioners of tantra, during their visualization practices, the images of these deities serve as a prototype to create the mental image and then imagine themselves as becoming one with the deities.

1999. <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/779> (accessed April 1, 2018).

⁷⁸ Green Tārā with her consort Amoghasiddhī (15th Century CE, Tibet)

⁷⁷ Jeff Watt, "Mandala of Tara (Buddhist Deity) - (Suryagupta, 17 Deity)." *Himalayan Art Resources*. July

The relationship between image and the ritual associated with it has been a process of dynamic evolution and kept changing according to tradition and time.⁷⁹

Forms of tantra deities and their visualization

It is also commonly accepted in tantric literature that the deities do not have a fixed form and they may appear as per the visualizations of the practitioner. The deities are referred to as mind-made formations (*manomayakāya*) of the practitioner's own consciousness.⁸⁰ Different forms and physical features of these goddesses are symbolic and given in a coded language that is explained in tantric manuals. Depending on the specific enlightened qualities that they embody, the goddesses may have peaceful or wrathful appearances. The *sādhans* prescribed for these goddesses are meant to destroy or transform habits of the mind, often by radical, unconventional methods.

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contemplation and used as a tool for spiritual development.

The appearance of goddesses in tantric Buddhism has twofold facets: the esoteric side which can be deciphered from tantric texts through lineage teachings held by learned monks and a facet of popular devotional practices and rituals which plays in the hearts and minds of their lay adherents in which, the traditions of goddesses vary based on the needs of different people.

Classification of Buddhist tantra

In the Tibetan tradition, tantra has been classified into a fourfold system: Kriyā Tantra, Caryā Tantra, Yoga Tantra and Anuttarayoga Tantra. The diverse array of practices related to goddesses has also been categorized accordingly. In Kriyā and Caryā Tantra, goddesses are visualized as external entities and their practices consist of devotion and rituals while goddesses embodying the more advanced yogic practices are part of Yoga-tantra and Anuttarayoga-tantra.

Anuttarayoga-tantra is further divided into Mother-Tantra and Father-Tantra. Most of the Mother Tantra practices consist of self-visualization in which the practitioners visualize themselves as the central meditational goddess of an elaborate, elegant *mandala*. However, here the goddess has to be visualized precisely with her non-inherent existence emanating from the wisdom of clear light (*prabhā-svara*) of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Mother-Tantra also consists of yogic practices of dealing with the systems of the central wind channel of the subtle body in order to

⁷⁹ Koichi Shinohara, *Spells, Images, and Mandalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, xii.

⁸⁰ *Kurikullakalpah*, X.

gain the subtlest level of blissful awareness.⁸¹

Yogic practice depicted in Vajrayoginī image

Vajrayoginī is one of the most popular meditational deities of Mother Tantra. Conceptually, she is an embodiment of wisdom (*prajñā*), representing the feminine aspect of one's innate nature and the clarity gained from the discriminating awareness in female form. She is one of the most often cited deities in tantric texts and there exists a number of praise verses (*stotra*) dedicated to her in different tantric texts. Most of the Anuttarayoga-tantra texts such as *Guhyasamāja-tantra* and *Hevajra-tantra* start with an opening verse which quotes the Buddha residing in the embryo (*bhaga*) of the Vajrayoginī as she is the essence of the body, speech and mind of all the *Tathāgatas*.⁸²

Chinnamundā is one of the forms of Vajrayoginī in which she manifests in a three-body form.⁸³ This form of Vajrayoginī is also referred to as Trikāya-vajrayoginī in *Guhyasamāja-tantra* and Bhaṭṭārikā-vajrayoginī in *Sādhnamālā*.⁸⁴

Chinnamundā, which literally means severed-headed, is the self-decapitated form of Vajrayoginī. In this unusual form, Vajrayoginī appears with

her two attendant yoginīs, Vajravairochanī and Vajravarṇanī. In Śākta tantras Chinnamundā is named as Chinnamastā where she is amongst the ten-great wisdom (*das-mahāvidyā*) goddesses. Śākta practitioners visualize her as an external entity while in Buddhism she is a personal meditational deity, existing not outside the practitioner's own mind.

One of the prominent sources for Vajrayoginī practices is *Sādhnamālā*, in which her seven *sādhanas* are given.⁸⁵ *Sādhana* 232 portrays her as:⁸⁶

The practitioners should visualize their navel as an opened white lotus surmounted by a red solar disk. On the top of that is a *Hṛim* (the seed Mantra of Vajrayoginī). This *Hṛim* transforms into the yellow coloured Vajrayoginī who is holding her own self-severed head in her left hand and a scimitar in her right hand.... Three streams of blood spurt out from her severed body as falling into the mouth of her severed head and into the mouths of the two yoginis, Vajravarṇanī, blue in colour to her left and Vajravairocanī, yellow in colour to her right both of whom hold a scimitar in their left and right hand respectively, and the skull cup

⁸¹ Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Guide to Dakini Land*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000, 202–13.

⁸² G. Farrow and I. Menon, eds., *The Concealed Essence of Hevajra Tantra*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992, 3.

⁸³ Elisabeth Anne Benard, *Chinnamastā: The Aweful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010, 74–75.

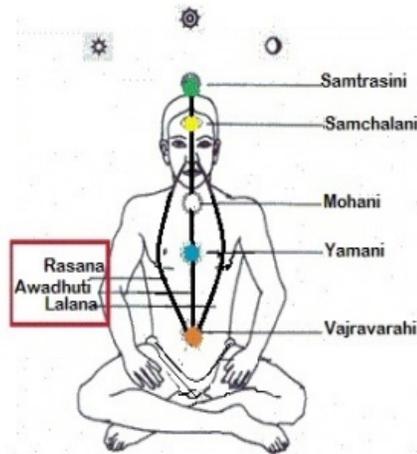
⁸⁴ *Sādhnamālā*, 453.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 452–58.

⁸⁶ Benard, *Chinnamastā: The Aweful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess*, 85.

in the right and left hands respectively.... Their hair is dishevelled. On all sides in the intermediate space between the yoginīs is the very frightening cremation ground.

an external object or activity.⁸⁷ The wind that flows through the left and right channels is impure and causes the false notion of a self-intrinsic existence of the phenomenal world, obscuring the experience of clear-light-emptiness



Chinnamundā and the meditation practice of Vajrayoginī as explained in 'Vajrayoginī Sadhana and Commentary' (Dhargvey 2006, p. 50)

The esoteric meaning of this 'awful' depiction of the goddess is hidden in yogic practice which is related to the three major wind channels (*nāḍī*) of the subtle body commonly known as Lalanā, Rasanā and Avadhūtī in Buddhist tantra. The practice manual of Vajrayoginī, *The guide to Dākinī Land* states that the inner winds are special subtle energy that flows through channels when the mind is engaged with

(*prabhā-svara-sūnyatā*) . When the central channel, which is pure in nature, is invoked, the practitioner experiences the falling off of the false

notion of selfhood (*ātmagrāha*) which gives rise to the wisdom of great bliss and the two other left and right wind channels continue to exist drawing their source from the central channel.

This yogic *sādhana* has been portrayed in an anthropomorphic representation of Chinnamundā Vajrayoginī in which she represents the central wind channel while her two attendants represent the left and right auxiliary channels. The five energy-

⁸⁷ Gyatso, *Guide to Dakini Land*, 218.

nodes (*cakra*) that pass through the central wind channel are also labelled as tantric goddesses. From this analysis of the iconography of the Vajrayoginī image, it can be observed that the symbolism of tantra has a profound practical basis inherent in it. Similar to any scientific research procedure in which experimental facts are correlated with mathematical symbols to work out a mathematical model, tantric masters also discover the practices by experimenting with their own psyche and the results obtained from their experiments are given a schematic form. This scheme which is modelled as an anthropomorphic figure represents yogic practices in an abstract manner. However, tantric texts are silent on or speak metaphorically about, these symbols to avoid their trivialization.

Conclusion

A deeper understanding of tantric iconography reveals that much of the symbolism of tantra has been derived from a profound practical basis which is often esoteric in nature. Tantric manuals suggest that the figures are not icons of beings, be it god or human, but that they are icons of ideas in a stylized mode. With their literature encoded in symbolism and their practices veiled in secrecy, most often such iconography is improperly assessed by people who are unaware of these esoteric concepts.

One should also keep in mind that in tantric Buddhism, the concept of a goddess appears in the framework of non-theism, which means that there is no external supreme being, and hence all religious

symbols of divinity, rituals and doctrines have just conventional utility rather than being the ultimate truth.

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