

Tara and Tibetan Buddhism: The Emergence of the Feminine  
Divine

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## **Dedication**

Much praise and gratitude to all the great masters, past, present, and future, who have kept the Dharma accessible. May it continue to flourish.

May the merits of this research bring benefit to all.

## Preface

I'll never forget the first time I read about Tara. A female Buddha? Originating from an advanced female practitioner? A vow to continue rebirth in a woman's body? Do I sense some feminism lurking in those musty pages of ancient texts? Needless to say, I was intrigued by Tara and to the principles she had to offer.

My next step was questioning the greater role that Tara played in the tradition as a whole. What influence does she have in a tradition where the integrity of the lineage is founded upon countless patriarchs? And while I looked to her as a source of inspiration and female empowerment, is this a view commonly held among others more deeply entrenched in the faith? Or is this merely my Western imputation that sees her as such a strong feminine force? It was these quandaries that propelled me forward in my research and provided the foundation of my intentions in doing so.

As I gathered my research, I looked to a variety of sources as I, ultimately, wanted to hold up what I considered to be the two sides of Tara—the “theoretical” (that which is presented in texts and teachings—essentially, what Tara is “supposed” to represent, according to her position within the Dharma) and the “reality” (the actual role that Tara plays in the hearts and minds of practitioners). For this, one aspect of my exploration involved a wide collection of texts on Tara—seeking information on her iconography, her rituals, the praises surrounding her, her symbolism, and the like. I also conducted a series of interviews with several Tibetan Buddhist nuns. I wanted to focus on women so that I could use them in comparison to my initial reaction (and my ultimate hypothesis) regarding Tara. I also chose to speak with ordained women so that I could get a glimpse

of what it is like, as a woman, to devote oneself completely to the Dharma, just as Tara had done herself.

Through the course of my research and the composition of my treatise, it became quite clear that I could not isolate Tara (or her influence) from the numerous roles she plays. Therefore, for this reason, my work has taken what I initially only saw as “Tara” and expanding it, rather than concentrating solely on the perceptions practitioners might have of her. Thus, I offer this opus as a focus on Tara as a whole—who she is, what she’s here to represent, and what some people have to say about her. It is my hope that I present my findings in as nonbiased a way possible; I intend not to redefine or “fix” Tibetan Buddhism, but, rather, to gain an understanding of identity; that of the female deity and that of the practitioners who worship her.

I must say that there are some things missing from my research and my composition. Due to various reasons, my findings lack personal male input—I did not widely interview any male practitioners. Furthermore, I could also have widened my scope and spoken with members of the lay community as well. Additionally, as a budding practitioner myself, naïve in the ways of the Tantra, not to mention Buddhism in general, I have not received any Tantric empowerments, as I feel I am not at the level of practice necessary for further advances. Thus, Tibetan Buddhism mandates a limitation on what I, as a follower of the tradition, can read, practice, and share. It is for this reason that I have excluded any mention of specific practices, rituals, and visualizations. While, scholastically, I suppose I could have made the choice to do so, I did not feel it personally appropriate to take that liberty. Similarly, while I had hoped to develop a Tara practice of my own, so as to gain a better understanding of what I was researching, the limitations in

my studies as a practitioner further hindered this addition. While I do feel a close connection with Tara, I have no personal experience to back up my findings. Perhaps though, in some ways, this is best; it would be better to remain neutral than impose my judgments. Finally, to get a comprehensive analysis of Tara and the feminine presence in Tibetan Buddhism, one might feel it necessary to research more of the cultural background, including the history of its precedent, Bön, as well as societal attitudes and conventions. For brevity's sake, my paper focuses solely on the feminine within the Buddhist framework. Additional research options might also include Tara in relation to pilgrimage, as well as a cross-cultural examination of Tara and Kuan Yin, the Chinese bodhisattva of compassion (and a female version of Avalokitesvara).

While my composition does not offer a fully in-depth look at praises, or philosophical analysis of them, it does provide the reader with a respective overview, enabling one to get taste of Tara, her background, her role in Tibetan Buddhism, and what that means for us as practitioners. May it be of benefit.

## Tara: An Introduction

This section will serve as a means to introduce the main background of Arya Tara. Through the discussion of her origin, stories surrounding her manifestations, and an analysis of the iconography at hand, I hope to set the stage for further, more in-depth analysis of the role Tara plays in Tibetan Buddhism. First, however, I felt it important to provide a bit of an introduction, as the basic information regarding Tara is pertinent to later discussions.

## Tara: Creation and Origin

Tibetan culture is a rich tapestry of historical and religious mythology, and Tara's beginnings are of no exception: ask a random handful of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, and receive, no question about it, a handful of different stories and variations.

The story used for mainly didactic reasons is one that tells of Tara's existence prior to divinity. Taranatha, the great scholar of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, tells that Tara was indeed a woman before she was a deity in the pantheon of Tibetan Buddhism. The Drum Sound Buddha was living and teaching in a land called "Multicolored Light." In this land there was also a king whose daughter was a princess named Wisdom Moon. Wisdom Moon had great devotion to the Buddha and would thus make many offerings to him and his following of disciples. As she improved as a practitioner, Wisdom Moon came before the Buddha and took the Bodhisattva Vow. The Princess' potential was quite evident to all the monks present, as they rejoiced in her devotion and virtue. Remarking on the great amount of merit she accumulated as a result of her deeds, the monks advised her to pray for a male rebirth. Born as a male, they figured, Wisdom Moon would then be able to

advance further on the path to enlightenment, and would also be able to be of greater benefit to the dharma and all the sentient beings around her.

On the other hand, Wisdom Moon, advanced in her studies, saw the sheer fallacy in the monk's views. In response, she asserted that:

Here, no man, no woman,  
No I, no individual, no categories.  
"Man" or "Woman" are only denominations  
created by confusions of perverse minds  
in this world.

Continuing, Wisdom Moon pointed out that there were many men on the path of the dharma, but so few women: "As for myself, as long as Samsara is not emptied, I will benefit beings appearing in a female body." It is this vow that Tara would later become known for; her insistence on the error in designations, and her resolve to lead beings on the higher path of realization.

Wisdom Moon remained dedicated to her practice, and in time, reached a supreme level of realization. Here, she dwelled in a state of consciousness known as the "concentration that frees beings from samsara." Liberating an infinite number of suffering beings both day and night, Wisdom Moon came to be known as "Savioress," or, in Sanskrit, "Tara." In another era, the Kalpa of Perfect Victory, Tara entered another state of consciousness, the "concentration that completely vanquishes demons," and served to protect countless beings from fear, danger, and demons. Coming to help as soon as called upon, Tara was famed for her speedy response, and additionally came to be known as "Swift and Courageous."

Finally, in the Kalpa Without Beginning, there existed a monk known as Stainless. This monk, through an empowerment, received the compassion of the mind of

all Buddhas, and, thus, came to be known as Avalokitesvara. Avalokitesvara was also granted another empowerment, bestowed upon him by the Five Victors, the Buddhas reigning over the five families of awakening. Upon receiving this blessing, Tara rose from the heart of Avalokitesvara. Coming to achieve the Buddha's wishes, she vowed to work for the benefit of all. Because of this unique facet of creation, Tara came to be referred to as the "Daughter of the World's Sovereign," or, simply, the daughter of Avalokitesvara. Tara, as well as Avalokitesvara, dwells in a pure land of "Potala," manifested on earth by a mountain in Southern India. (Bokar Rinpoche, 19-21)

At this point, I wish to, again, make mention of how widely diverse the stories surrounding Tara are. While, through my research, I have found the Wisdom Moon story to be generally accepted, I did come across a different twist on the story relating Tara to Avalokitesvara. It is as follows:

As the embodiment of compassion, Avalokitesvara worked tirelessly for the sake of all who suffered. Yet looking out onto all of samsara, Avalokitesvara suddenly realized the enormity of the situation at hand. There were so many suffering beings—so much that his hard work seemed to have little result. Despairing over his conclusion, he began to cry. As the tears fell, a lotus bloomed from the droplets, and from the lotus appeared Tara. Turning to Avalokitesvara, she comforted him:

O noble one, I offer myself in the service of freeing the countless sentient beings from cyclic existence. Shed no more tears. We shall work together to turn the battle against samsara.

This aspect of her creation sheds crucial light on Buddhist principles. While it is true that Avalokitesvara symbolizes compassion in its purest sense, it is only with Tara

that he is able to end suffering. Tara, as a result, comes to symbolize enlightened work. Thus, “compassion is the necessary first impulse, but for it to bring joy it must be united to effective action.” (Mullin, 58)

As it turns out, Tara and Avalokitesvara have a long history together. Tibetan historical myth claims that, long before humans existed, the earth was inhabited by a monkey and an ogress. After time, the two grew close, fell in love, and mated to produce the first six humans. Propagating what would be claimed as the Tibetan people, the monkey was believed to be an emanation of Avalokitesvara, and the ogress, Tara. The two continued to work collectively, always showing up in various forms together. Another example of this is the famed Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo. The king had two spouses, princesses from both China and Nepal. Both women brought the Buddhist tradition with them, fostering the building of temples and the spread of the dharma—Kunsho, the Chinese princess, brought with her the great Buddha statue that would later be housed in the Jokhang in Lhasa. Tritsun, the Nepalese princess, brought a statue of Akshobya Buddha, later housed in Ramoche Monastery in Lhasa. Again, the king was considered to be an emanation of Avalokitesvara and the two wives as emanations of Tara.

Gedün-dr'up is the monk famous for being the very first reincarnation of the great Avalokitesvara, although this was not recognized until after his death. . This monk would become the first of an entire line of incarnations, known to Tibetans as Dalai Lamas. Without surprise, the first Dalai Lama felt a strong devotion to Tara, making Tara practice his most important. This tradition of devotion was spread among all the Dalai Lamas and since him, all are seen as incarnations of Avalokitesvara, all having a special

link with Tara. It is for these numerous reasons that Tibetans, especially, feel a strong connection and reverence to both Avalokitesvara (or, in Tibetan, Chenrezig) and Tara (Dolma, “Mother of Liberation,” in Tibetan). While they do not hold Chenrezig and Tara as exclusively “Tibetan deities,” the Tibetan people do feel that they have a special karmic bond that has blessed them with the close ties to the two. (Mullins 58)

### Tara: Iconography and Manifestations

In the form, color, and appearance of Tara, we can find great symbolism and meaning, especially in light of the deeds through which she is so well known. There are, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, many manifestations that Tara can take, as exemplified in her twenty-one forms, the eight Taras who save from the eight dangers and the respective praises to them. I have chosen to examine these manifestations through the homage paid to them, and thus, more details on Tara in her many forms will follow in the section on practice and praise. Tara is, however, most widely known in two forms—that of White Tara and Green Tara.

Green Tara is seen as peaceful, saving beings from danger and fears. She is, as the name suggests, green in color. Her hue is symbolic of awakened activity and active compassion; in correlation to this is her existence as the consort of Amoghasiddhi, who reigns over the activity family of Buddhas. Thus, Tara acts completely to benefit her devotees, and is quick and swift in her actions. While her left leg is bent and withdrawn, symbolizing that she has renounced afflictive emotions, her right leg is extended, showing her readiness to jump to the aid of all sentient beings. Moreover, both legs serve

to depict that although Tara is void of imperfections, she has chosen to stay in samsara to be of aid to all who need her. Her right hand is in the giving mudra, indicating that she bestows “ordinary accomplishments (supernatural powers)” as well as “sublime accomplishments (realization of nature of the mind).” (Bokar Rinpoche 44) Her left hand is in the refuge mudra, showing that Tara perfectly embodies the Triple Gem, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The joining of her thumb and ring finger symbolize the union of skillful means and knowledge, and the remaining three fingers are, again, representational of the Three Jewels previously mentioned. Holding the stems of utpala flowers, she shows us that “all the qualities of realization have fully bloomed within her.” (44) The flowers themselves are characterized by three buds; one yet to bloom, one blooming, and one fully bloomed. These buds represent the Buddhas of three times; the past, present, and the future.<sup>1</sup> Her charm and beauty is indicative of her great compassion, as the mother of all Buddhas. Her hair is pulled up into a knot on the top of her head, creating an *usniska*, a protrusion seen as a mark of enlightenment. Her hair is also flowing down onto her shoulders, showing the “boundless freedom of uncontrived, intrinsic awareness.” (Chagdud Khandro 28) She is adorned with a crown, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, armlets, anklets, and silken garments. These ornaments are worn not as attachments to material possessions, but are merely adornments of her supreme qualities and deeds. Back straight, never faltering, Tara sits on a lotus bed, showing she is free from any obscurations, in front of a great moon, expressing the “fullness of inexhaustible happiness” (Bokar Rinpoche 45) and her complete enlightened nature.

White Tara is characterized by her seven eyes—three on her face, one the palm of each hand, and one on the sole of each foot. The eyes on her face represent the purity of

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, Geshe Dorji Damdul. 10 May, 2004.

her body, speech, and mind. Those on her hands and feet represent the four unlimited qualities of the bodhisattvas: compassion, loving-kindness, joy, and equanimity. (Farrer-Halls, 54) Sitting in the vajra (full lotus) posture, devoid of any emotional defilement, her white color shows the “absence of the two veils (conflicting emotions and dualistic knowledge)” (Bokar Rinpoche 45). Her left hand is in the refuge mudra, holding the utpala flower, similar to Green Tara, and her right hand, extended in mudra as well, offers protection and relief to all suffering sentient beings. White Tara is popular because she is known for bestowing blessings of long life. It is for this reason that many practitioners receive a White Tara empowerment and perform her practice upon falling ill—she will come to your aid and save you from untimely sickness and death. Also, White Tara thankas and statues are traditional offerings to Lamas, wishing them a long life of beneficial practice. White Tara is also known as Chintamatra Chakra, meaning, “Wheel Accomplishing All Wishes;” the name comes from the root mantra located in her heart.

Tara is also seen to manifest in other forms, such as that of Bhrikuti (Thronyerchen<sup>2</sup>), Kurukulla (Kurukulle), Sitatapatra (Dukkar), Ushnishavijaya (Namgyalma), Vishvamata (Natsok Yum, Kalachakra’s consort), Naraitma (Damema), and Yeshe Tsogyel. All female deities, in fact, are seen as having the same essence; they are all of Prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom.<sup>3</sup> (39) What is imperative to note, however, is that it is not as if there are other or multiple Taras, all with their own origin stories, separate attributes, and the like. The truth is that they are different manifestations of the very same deity. Tara is able to manifest herself in a variety of forms, given the

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that terms set in parenthesis are the Tibetan form of the preceding term. I will continue to interject Tibetan in this manner for the remainder of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> This will be further addressed in the section on Tara and Tantra.

particular circumstances at hand, and the unique deeds of each are only a specific part of the entire protection she offers as a whole.

Yet, how then, one might ask, is this made possible? Buddhist philosophy states that there are three kayas, or, bodies of a Buddha. They are the *Dharmakaya*, Truth Body (Chö-ku), the *Samboghakaya*, Complete Enjoyment Body (long-ku), and the *Nirmanakaya*, Emanation Body (trul-ku). The *Dharmakaya* is formless, as it is the enlightened being's union with all-pervasive emptiness; this does not exist as a location, but, as the ultimate reality of all phenomena. The *Samboghakaya* and the *Nirmanakaya* are both, on the other hand, form bodies. The *Samboghakaya* is a spontaneous projection from the *Dharmakaya*. It is created by a Buddha's desire to help sentient beings; it is of pure nature. Finally, the *Nirmanakaya* is the lower level physical forms of a Buddha (e.g. the 32 major marks and 80 minor marks of enlightenment). The *Nirmanakaya* appears in the human realm to spread the dharma when the conditions are appropriate. The three kayas can be best described in relation to one another as follows:

While the *Dharmakaya* is the direct product of a Buddha's insight into the ultimate nature of reality—his wisdom—the two form bodies are a result of the altruistic motivation to help others. As a result, they are infinite in number, manifesting throughout time and space whenever and wherever there are beings capable of being led toward liberation. Therefore, though the form bodies are produced by a Buddha's compassion, their appearance is contingent upon the merit of others." (Avedon, 414)

Tara personifies these three kayas perfectly, but due to our lack of realization, we are tend to only perceive of her existing within the *Nirmanakaya*, as she is manifested in statues, art, great teachers, fellow sangha members, and such. "Ultimately, all that appears in the *Nirmanakaya* is recognized as her emanation and is experienced as

absolutely inseparable from *Dharmakaya* emptiness and *Sambhogakaya* clarity.”  
(Chagdud Khandro 28)

Again, allow me to introduce a word of caution. One should still take care not to see even these three *kayas* as three separate unities, nor the myriad deities that embody their characteristics. Compassion is a general quality of all Buddhas, yet it takes its form in the emanation of Chenrezig. But there is not only one “Buddha of Compassion.” It is similar to when we talk of “Buddhas” in general. We refer to Shakyamuni Buddha as Lord Buddha, because yes, he was the historical person who attained enlightenment. But the ultimate truth is that there are hundreds and millions of Buddhas—before and after his appearance. Therefore, while Tara exists in the form she does, she needs not *always* appear as “Tara.” The form body is external; the internal possesses infinite qualities, appearing “simultaneously in many different forms in accordance with the needs of the trainees and in dependence upon that Buddha’s former wishes and prayers.” (Avedon 397) Hence, one Buddha, Tara, for example, can appear as Manjushri, Avalokitesvara, and Tara—*all at the same time*, based on the needs of those to whom they are of service.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Again, see the Tantra section for more insight.

### Tara: A Deeper Look

This section will shy away from the surface level interpretation of Tara previously discussed. Delving into the more philosophical aspect of her manifestations, I will introduce the means by which Tara is a part of Tantric side of the tradition, and intend to illustrate the deeper levels upon which one is able to ascertain Tara's purpose as a female deity. This will be done through an introductory overview of Tara as Tantra in general, praise and ritual ascribed to Tara, and two specific texts—the twenty one homages and the eight fears.

### Tara as Tantra

The Tibetan Buddhist path is distinguished by the very characteristics of its practice; it is also referred to as Vajrayana Buddhism (Sang-ngak), meaning “secret, very swift path.” The intention behind this secret path are teachings that work to free the mind of the five poisons—anger, grasping, ignorance, jealousy, and pride. By doing so, mental obscurations are removed, allowing one to glimpse into the nature of the true potential that is universal to us all. Additionally, the Tantric path that Tibetan Buddhism offers is intended to be implemented into everyday life, reminding us that a transformation of the mind is available to us all, should we allow it the proper time, energy, and dedication needed to enhance it. Thus, all we encounter can become the very agent that will stimulate our mind towards the two truths of Tantra: the profound uncontaminated bliss, and the wisdom that realizes emptiness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Interview, Geshe Dorji Damdul. 10 May, 2004.

The origin of Tara Tantra cannot really be located, due to the fact that “Tantras belong to the omniscience of the Buddhas who utter a Tantra as it is needed in a given epoch.” (Bokar Rinpoche 51) Tara Tantra has, therefore, been revealed during many past kalpas, prior to that of the present. Our present kalpa can be divided into four parts: “totally endowed,” “endowed with three-quarters,” “endowed with two-quarters,” and “endowed with conflicts.” Life during the “totally endowed” era was good; humans lived an extremely long time, and great happiness was manifest through the ethos of right views and love for all beings. During the “endowed with three-quarters” era, things began to decrease; life span, material goods, and happiness were all lessened. This declination was heightened during the time “endowed with two-quarters,” ultimately bringing us to where we are now—“endowed with conflicts.” All of our history, past and present exists within the realm of this section of the present kalpa. Life is limited to 100 years, and humans are granted only a quarter of their original happiness. In essence, we’ve fallen on difficult times.

From his pure land dwelling of Mount Potala, long before the appearance of Shakyamuni Buddha, Avalokitesvara shared the teachings of Tara Tantra. Revealing the Tantra during each epoch of the kalpa, Avalokitesvara first revealed 800,000 stanzas, then 600,000, 12,000, and 1,000 stanzas, respectively. This Tantra, however, is not what we have now—that which we know as Tara Tantra was revealed much later by Shakyamuni Buddha. The night before his awakening, as he sat under the bodhi tree, Lord Buddha was attacked by demons, sent to try and avert him from his goal. Tara appeared, and with eight great laughs, the demons fell to the ground, with no harm done to Shakyamuni. Entering perfect meditation, attaining liberation at dawn, Lord Buddha

then uttered the Tantra of Tara. (Bokar Rinpoche 52-53) These tantras were still not revealed to humans, but, rather, to the bodhisattvas, gods, and nagas dwelling not on the human realms, but on pure land domains. Guarded by Vajrapani (Chana Dorje), “Guardian of the Secrets,” the Tara Tantra, along with all others, remained a secret.

Long after Shakyamuni Buddha, the texts of Tara practice began to be disseminated through divine revelation, such as the master Candragomin, who received 108 texts on practice while having visions of Tara herself. It was through this type of revelation that the tantras finally reached humans. King Indrabhuti, a contemporary of Shakyamuni Buddha, wrote down the Tantric practices after they were revealed to him by Vajrapani and other bodhisattvas. Through other miraculous means, Indrabhuti also received texts that were already written down. As it was not the appropriate time to completely distribute such texts, the king kept them secret, locking them up and only sharing with a select few.

Tara Tantra was not completely introduced to humans until three centuries after the death of Shakyamuni, in the third century, BCE. With all tantras initially only revealed through visions, the Vajrayana was thus followed by only a small number of practitioners, due to the means of transmission; passed only from teacher to disciple, it was, indeed, a very secret, select practice. Eventually, the propagation of Tara Tantra began to take hold, largely due to a Bengali monk called Hayapala.

Having expounded many teachings on Mahayana doctrine, Hayapala met the Brahmin Guhyashila, who had received instruction on Tara practice from Vajrapani. Hayapala was given the Tara empowerment, began his practice, and thus, became realized. Hayapala traveled to Uddiyana, in northwest India, where more tantras were

revealed to him, this time from several dakinis. Those received were: *Fundamental Tantra on Tara's Origin*, *Violent and Wrathful Tantra*, *Secret Tantra of the Sublime Unsurpassable Vajra*, and *Tantra of Producing Heruka*, with a temple in Tipurar built to house them. To his regular disciples, Hayapala gave Prajnaparamita teachings, as well as those on various Mahayana sutras. To his gifted disciples, however, he taught Tara practice, leading them to realization themselves. The Tara lineage was then passed to Hayagosha, who gave it to Nagarjuna, who can also credit his realization to Tara practice. The lineage has henceforth passed without interruption. Tara practice was brought into Tibet through a multitude of sources, and widely propagated, due in part to the likes of Taranatha and Atisha. (55-56)

In essence, Tantra shows us that we all have the “heart of awakening.” This inner reality, however, is not fully actualized; it is covered by veils and karmic formations that hinder our transformation, and hence, must be uncovered to be revealed. Through Tantric empowerments, we are allowed to proceed on the path that will uncover, purify, and awaken our minds. We are able to take the virtual and metamorphose it into the real. Such empowerments, however, are only given by a vajra-master (vajracharya) who has also personally received the specific deity empowerment he will give. This empowerment must have been received from an unbroken lineage, and, as one last requirement, the master must have accomplished the deity practice. Practitioners about to receive the initiation must also have formally taken refuge in the Triple Gem, and the proceeding ritual itself can be performed for a group, large or small, or even an individual.

Tara Tantra involves three practices—an external, inner, and secret practice—and different empowerments are required for each. Thus, with each different empowerment,

based on different levels of Tantric practice, each ritual is unique in its execution and representation. These ceremonies, known to be a “transmission of power (wang kur),” involve visualizations, mantras, mudras, and the use of ritualistic objects. It is, in essence, “permission,” and is considered as such. A purification of the body, mind, and speech, the empowerment allows us to meditate on the deity, recite mantras, and enter contemplation of the deity (samadhi). Granted, with deities such as Avalokitesvara and Tara representing the Buddhas’ activity, if one feels sincere devotion, it is permissible to recite mantras and prayers.<sup>6</sup> These actions, even without the possession of an empowerment, will bring great benefit to the practitioner and myriad sentient beings to whom the merit is dedicated. With the empowerment, however, benefit is amplified.

So what then, in relation to Tantra, does Tara have to offer? First, one must assert that there are many different methods of interpretation on Tara, based on Tantric principles. There is the literal meaning/understanding, the general meaning, the hidden meaning, the ultimate meaning, as well as six different modes of interpretation—a total of ten different levels of Tantra on which to perceive Tara.<sup>7</sup> On the very surface level, Tara is a female Buddha; one who made a vow and is carrying out her promise to aid all beings, doing so in the female form. A different level of approach, one much deeper, is looking at what the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy views as the three main constituents: channels, drops, and winds/energies. Every action and activity done is carried out through our energies/winds. Tara is seen as the very embodiment of this wind—resulting in her ability to fulfill our wishes and prayers swiftly. Even deeper, is the archetypical

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding high tantras, one is not permitted to recite mantras, practice deity meditation, or read related texts without first receiving an empowerment. Doing so can, in effect, produce negative karma and actually bring problems and misfortune to the practitioner.

<sup>7</sup> *Interview, Geshe Dorji Damdul, 6 May 2004.*

representation Tara holds as a woman, coming to symbolize wisdom. (More on this is soon to follow.) The Buddha advised his followers that to continue on his path, they must begin to implicate the various types of wisdom into their practice. It is through this wisdom, and only through this wisdom, that one is able to ascertain the realization of emptiness. Thus, Tara is the very manifestation of our own potential.<sup>8</sup> Beyond all conventions, concepts, and designations, she is the embodiment of emptiness. Because she *is* emptiness, she has no form, and exists as the *Dharmakaya*. Yet, as previously elaborated, Tara is also able to manifest as the *Sambhogakaya*. It is at this level that she appears to us. She is, along with all other deities, the pure nature of the mind, the perfection of knowledge, and emptiness. For this reason, Tara comes to also be known as the “mother of all Buddhas.”

One who is slightly familiar with Buddhist tradition might find confusion in labeling Tara as the central “mother” figure, in light of the fact that yet another female Buddha, Prajnaparamita, is referred to using the same title. In understanding why the same epithet is used to denote both deities, one must see that the two got their title in different ways. Prajnaparamita is considered the mother because all who reach enlightenment do so by realizing transcendental wisdom, as expounded by her sutra, the The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, better known as the Heart Sutra. It is only this type of wisdom that will enable a practitioner to become realized. And Prajnaparamita is seen as the emanation of this very wisdom.

Tara, on the other hand, is referred to as “mother of all Buddhas” because she personifies *Buddha karma* (sang-gyey dyi trinley). *Buddha karma* “is karma in the sense of post-enlightenment work, to the Buddha work of bringing benefit, higher evolution

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

and enlightenment to all living beings.” (Mullin 55) This is also known as “*Buddha energy*,” “*Buddha activity*,” and “*enlightenment activity*.” Therefore, while transcendental wisdom is what triggers liberation, *Buddha karma* “is the direct force fostering the conditions that make the birth of this wisdom possible.” (55) The Indian master Asanga put it best, writing:

The sun effortlessly releases its radiance,  
 Causing lotuses to bloom and seeds to sprout.  
 Similarly buddha karma shines from the sphere of buddha mind,  
 Causing lotus-like living beings to evolve and grow.

It follows, then, that Tara is a symbol of that activity, especially in light of her symbolization of the winds that are responsible for such activity to take place.<sup>9</sup>

In summation, Prajnaparamita is the “mother” because her wisdom gives birth to the potential in us all—enlightenment. This is typically seen as the Sutrayana. Tara, conversely, is the “mother” because her activity causes beings to grow towards enlightenment. This is known as the Tantrayana. Yet, as I have previously stated in the section covering the iconography and manifestations of Tara, all female deities, are ultimately seen as having the same essence—this allots for my earlier discourse on Tara as an embodiment of wisdom and emptiness. Furthermore, Prajnaparamita and Tara are mothers to one another or, simply put, *one Buddha in two (of many) forms*; both reached enlightenment by relying on what they other represents (Tara, through Prajnaparamita’s wisdom, and Prajnaparamita through Tara’s enlightened activity.) (57)

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<sup>9</sup> This also corresponds with her color—green is the color of the energy/wind element. *Buddha karma* is transmitted by the energy/wind element, and, consequently, Tara is green in color.

## Tara: Purpose of Practice and Praise

The main idea behind the rituals of deity practice is to, mainly, establish a connection with that deity. In such rituals, there are many different phases, each one working to deepen the bond between deity and practitioner. These phases include deity visualizations, offerings, prayers, and mantras. Similar to the difference in empowerments given, the rituals also vary in relation to their tantric intricacy. The Vajrayana contains four groups of tantras, and, thus, each group has their own rituals and rules. Despite these differences, the purpose is always the same: “Through the ritual, our mind is imprinted with the deity’s presence and blessing.” (Bokar Rinpoche 63) To create this imprint, we must utilize our body, speech, and mind.

Using our body, we create a proper shrine, make offerings, sit in the correct meditation posture, and do the according mudras. These actions are seen as an offering to the deity, or even, perhaps, an invitation. Through these deeds, the “complete involvement of our person,” (64) the effect on the mind that the ritual holds for us is increased. Our speech is used to recite mantras and texts during our practice, serving as a support to the activities done by the body and mind. Our speech, thus, evokes what our mind conceives and body demonstrates. Finally, our mind is the “main agent of the ritual,” concentrating and focusing throughout all phases of the ritual: “taking refuge, developing motivation of awakening, consecrating the offerings, inviting the deity, visualizations, offerings, praising, reciting mantras, asking forgiveness for errors made during the ritual, the departure of the deity in his or her support, dissolving the visualization, and dedicating.” (64) In whole, ritual works on several levels of intention. It exists as purification, removing the veils of obscurity constructed by our mistaken mind

and its delusions. Additionally, we are able to gain merit and begin establishing positive karma, creating a lasting effect on our life and practice. Most of all, ritual prepares us for the manifestation of the Enjoyment Body—showing us that the true potential of our mind is nothing separate from the deity itself.<sup>10</sup>

Another aspect of Tara practice is prayer and praise. Recitation of prayers and mantras while working, day and night, throughout all aspects of daily life was a common occurrence among traditional Tibetans. To this day, many members of the lay community feel a strong faith and devotion to Tara, confident that she is watching over and offering protection. Even to those who may not grasp the subtle philosophical concepts and meanings behind such praises and prayer, the devotion is still a foundation of life and practice—strong nonetheless.

At an ultimate level, reaching a pure understanding of emptiness and its all-pervasive influence, we have attained a level of union with the deity—we are both of the same essence; the ultimate truth, the pure nature of the mind, free from duality and convention. Until we reach that point, however, we see the deity as something external from ourselves; thus our need to call upon them for help and guidance. And to our limited scope, the deity appears to come to us, offering her blessings and protection. It is also common for practitioners to call upon deities to help fulfill their wishes and needs—Tara is especially looked to, due to her swift helpful nature, coming to aid in all situations.

Take note, however, that prayer does not serve to “change” one’s karma; karma is a reality of existence that really cannot be altered directly. However, “when we say that the law of karma is infallible, it means that a cause will necessarily produce its effect *if*

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<sup>10</sup> Note: greater focus on deity yoga, meditation, and the intention behind such practices will proceed in the following section.

*nothing prevents it from happening* (italics mine).” (78) Hence, when new elements are added, it becomes possible to have an effect on one’s karma and the actions that thus result from such formations. Through our devotion, prayers, and regret of past actions, we are able to *modify* our karma—“The seed of a week will grow in an infallible way, unless we pull out the young sprout.” (79)

Most people, however, tend to just take for granted the effectiveness of prayer. It is best, however, to look at prayer as akin to a bridle on a horse—you may have a very energetic horse that you are unable to direct, never knowing where it is going to take you. With a bridle, however, you can guide your horse to the desired destination. The same can be applied to prayer; without it, the accumulation of our energies runs wild and rampant. Not directed on any particular path, it may be used in a negative manner. Through our prayers, however, we can harness these energies and use them in a virtuous manner, thus dedicating the merit to all sentient beings. Doing this, we are able to increase our compassion and love, reviving and reenergizing our mental state, and, in due course, make our practice come alive. Rather than existing in the realm of the theoretical, our practice (and the purpose behind it) becomes progressive, bringing us closer to our ultimate goal—complete Buddhahood, enabling us to better see how to serve and aid the rest of samsara that is still suffering.<sup>11</sup>

The explanation for the mechanisms behind prayer is analogous to the levels on which Tara exists within the Tantra and that which she comes to represent. The foundational philosophies of Buddhism states that all things exist according to the two truths; the conventional (as seen in the designation we ascribe onto phenomena) and the ultimate (the universal quality of emptiness that is the true nature of reality, hidden from

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<sup>11</sup> *Interview, Geshe Dorji Damdul, 6 May 2004.*

us because of the veils we construct—our imputation of inherency and essence.) On a conventional level, yes, Tara does come down to us in our time of need to answer our prayers. Yet on the deeper, more subtle ultimate level, with Tara existing as our innate potential, prayer is really the working of our own wind/energy elements. By activating these energies, the desired actions take place and, accordingly, our prayers are “answered.”<sup>12</sup>

Meditation involving the deity is another method of deconstructing mistaken views, comparable to the purpose behind prayer. The manner in which we currently perceive the deity is in a dualistic fashion—there is the existence of the “I,” and, separately, that of the deity, as an “other.” The deity seems to have an essence; “Tara” is a static construct, just as any other deity, and is far removed from my lower level of existence. The deities, thus, become manifestations of our minds. The truth, however, is that Tara (and all others) embodies the true nature of the mind. She is without conventions, and does not depend on the dualisms of “I” and “other.” Enjoying pure happiness, free from suffering, Tara is indicative of the level at which one must strive to reach. Note, though, that “this does not imply the absence of manifestation, but that this manifestation is without duality.” (Bokar Rinpoche 10) On the relative level, deities exist in a variety of forms, each one different in their colors, sizes, attributes, and such. Yet as we begin to practice with them, including visualizations of them during meditation, they become our guide to the ultimate—not just because they are the means by which we advance in our realization, but also because the “ultimate” is their (and our) true nature. While we travel along the path of the dharma, we view the deity as external to us; yet, at the moment of realization, they “are no longer seen as external but as the manifestation of

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

the Absolute Body, beyond duality, beyond and notion of ‘I’ and ‘another,’ the absolute body with which our mind has merged.” (12) Therein lies the idea behind deity meditation.

With Tara meditation, we envision her as she appears to us—in her array of colors, with certain mudras, etc. Tara is, thus, a separate entity, a creation of our mind. The more we advance in our meditation, , Tara ceases to exist as a mental creation, revealing herself as an expression of the Absolute Body. And, at this point, we have reached an awareness where there is no longer a duality; she is not separate, there is no distinction between “Tara” and “practitioner.”<sup>13</sup>

On an ultimate level, the Complete Enjoyment Body, the *Samboghakaya*, is free from the limitations of the conventional body—it is thus also known as the “Body of All Forms.” All deities, then, are able to manifest in an infinite number of forms. Through all these manifestations, the deities teach us to understand that things are not static, not limited to one designation, and, moreover, do not appear as they seem. If Tara was to exist in only one form, we would, without a doubt, come to essentialize her—this is “Tara,” this is what she looks like, this is the role she plays in the tradition, and so on. But in her myriad forms, Tara illustrates the enormity of reality, further demonstrating our limited understanding. By assuming these various forms, deities are able to better benefit all sentient beings—allowing them to address our needs in the most skillful means possible. Our relative understanding sees the world through dichotomies, such as “male” versus “female,” and as a result, our perception of deities follow suit. It is because of these designations that we come to view the masculine as symbolic of skillful means

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<sup>13</sup> Note: without proper empowerments, practitioners are to visualize Tara in front of them. With initiation, however, the practitioner is able to visualize themselves as Tara—together as one.

(compassionate activity) and, conversely, the feminine as wisdom. Ultimately, however, all deities—be they “male” or “female”—possess both qualities; they are united, never separate. (14-15)

In Tibetan, the deity one devotes practice to is known as one’s “*yiddam*.” All deities, of course, serve the same means and, therefore, as a practitioner, one does not *need* a particular deity. In some instances, though, through our karmic predispositions,<sup>14</sup> we come into contact with a specific deity. This influence will drive us to practice, and lead us to choose a specific deity. Able to see any connections that disciple might have, one’s lama may also give a *yiddam* to a disciple. In Tibetan Buddhism, Tara, Manjushri, and Chenrezig are all commonly taken as *yiddams*, and throughout the four different schools, different deities tend to be practiced in particular. In many great Tibetan monasteries and nunneries, for example, Tara mantras and praises are practiced, especially prior to debate, invoking Tara to help assist the practitioner. Coming out of such institutions, many nuns and monks remain attached to Tara. While they do have other deities on which praise is bestowed, the bond established with Tara is indelible.<sup>15</sup> However, no matter what circumstance, an individual may be able to sense a connection and, on their own doing, decide upon which deity to devote practice. Through our practice, we besiege Tara to bestow her love and compassion onto us, thereby increasing our own personal qualities.<sup>16</sup> Holding onto Tara throughout our life-long practice, we can ultimately accomplish all the qualities fully bestowed on us by her. When Buddhahood is reached, we take on all her aspects; if we have a strong connection with Tara, we will

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<sup>14</sup> Such as, for example, a strong practice already developed in past lives.

<sup>15</sup> *Interview, Geshe Dorji Damdul. 10 May 2004.*

<sup>16</sup> Note: because Tara has every quality (not just compassion), we can also ask her to bestow upon us other qualities, such as, for example, the wisdom of Manjushri.

take on her form upon full realization—due to envisioning ourselves as Tara at the stage of generation, the Highest Yoga Tantra.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

## Examples of Praise: Textual Sources

This section will make use of a small selection of the many praises written in honor of Tara. While there is a seemingly infinite number of praises, sadhanas, and songs written to Arya Tara, I have selected what I feel to be central: the twenty-one verses in praise of Tara and the text praising the eight Taras.<sup>18</sup>

### *Tara: Praise in Twenty-One Homages*

This praise, constructed of twenty-one stanzas, is not of human origin, and is part of the tantra known as “The Seven Hundred Thoughts, The King of the Tara Tantra.” It was uttered by Vairochana Buddha, not through his mouth, but instead, through the protuberance (*usniska*) on his head. Originally documented in Sanskrit, it was translated into Tibetan, becoming part of the Kangyur, the collection of texts composed of the words of the Buddha. (Bokar Rinpoche 94) This praise, addressing her greatness, illustrates how, in her numerous forms, Tara embodies all the activities of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The praise is to be recited with confidence and devotion, and as a result, Tara bestows her blessing of purification and merit, granting the wishes of her devotees.

The first verse is the brief praise to Tara, an abbreviated version received by Tara’s great devotee Atisha. Verses two through fourteen praise her *sambhogakaya* aspects; two through seven highlight her peaceful aspects, seven through fourteen touch

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<sup>18</sup> Note: these praises are also available from a variety of sources and, thus, exists in many versions. Martin Willson’s text on Tara offers a nice selection of many of these.

upon her wrathful side. The fifteenth verse praises her *dharmakaya* aspect, and verses sixteen through twenty-one praise her enlightened activities. For clarity, the verses are as follows, with a brief explanation<sup>19</sup> of each verse, in relation to the respective form it praises.

THE PRAISE IN TWENTY-ONE HOMAGES TO OUR LADY, THE GODDESS ARYA-TARA, WITH ITS BENEFITS<sup>20</sup>

*Homage! Tara, swift, heroic!*

*With regard like instant lightening!*

*Sprung from op'ning stamens from the*

*Lord of Three Worlds' facial lotus!*

(This Tara, red in color, is known as “The Swift Heroine.” This is, as previously mentioned, a brief way in which to praise Tara.)

*Homage! She whose face combines a*

*hundred autumn moons at fullest!*

*Blazing with light-rays resplendent*

*as a thousand-star collection!*

(This Tara, white in color, is known as “The Great Pacifier.” This praises Tara for her radiating light and illustrious facial complexion.)

*Homage! Golden One, blue lotus,*

*water-born, in hand adorned!*

*Giving, Effort, Calm, Austerities,*

*Patience, Meditation Her field!*

(This Tara, yellow with a bluish hue, is referred to as “Tara who increases.” This verse is in praise of Tara, her color, her gestures, and the manner in which they came to be.)

*Homage! Crown of the Tathagatas,*

*She who goes in endless triumph!*

*Honored much by conqu'rors' Offspring!*

*Having reached ev'ry perfection!*

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<sup>19</sup> Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche. *Teachings on Tara*. Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. 1986 and 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Willson, Martin. *In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress*. Wisdom Publications: Boston. 1986. pages 113-116.

(This Tara, white/yellow in color, is known as “Tara of Life Force.” In praise, it recognizes how the bodhisattvas and Buddhas rely on Tara with great respect.)

*Homage! Filling with TUTTARA,  
HUM the regions and space-quarters!  
Trampling with Her feet the sev'n worlds,  
able to draw forth all [beings]!*

(This Tara, red in color, is known as, “Tara Who Resonates With HUM.” The verse praises the manner in which Tara is able to overcome all obstacles.)

*Homage! Worshiped by the All-Lord,  
Sakra, Agni, Brahma, Marut!  
Honoured by the hosts of spirits,  
corpse-raisers, gandharvas, yaksas!*

(This Tara, black with a reddish hue, is referred to as “Tara Who Is Victorious Over the Three Worlds.” It praises Tara because of the services that great gods offer to her.)

*Homage! With Her TRAT and PHAT sounds  
crusher of foes' magic diagrams!  
Putting Her feet left out, right back,  
Eyes all full of blazing fire!*

(This Tara, black, is the “Tara Who Crushes Others’ Forces.” The verse focuses on Tara’s ability to overcome others.)

*Homage! TURE, very dreadful!  
Destroyer of Mara's champion!  
She with frowning lotus visage  
who is slayer of all enemies!*

(This Tara, “The Pulverizer Of The Maras,” is red-black. The verse in is praise of Tara’s destruction of maras and two obscurations.)

*Homage! She adorned with fingers,  
at Her heart, in Three-Jewel mudra!  
Wheel of all quarters adorned,  
filled with masses of Her own light!*

(This Tara, “Tara Who Embodies The Three Jewels,” is white in color. The verse praises Tara for her mudras.)

*Homage! She of swelling Great joy,  
diadem emitting garlands!  
Mirthful, laughing with TUTTARE,  
subjugating maras, devas!*

(“The Great Subduer,” this Tara is red in color. This praises her for the ornament on her crown and the sound emanating from her mouth.)

*Homage! She able to summon  
all earth-guardians and their trains!  
Shaking, frowning, with Her HUM-sign  
Saving from ev'ry misfortune!*

(“Tara Who Eliminates Poverty,” she is red-yellow. The verse praises Tara for her ability to compel the guardians of the ten directions to do their activities.)

*Homage! Crowning locks adorned with  
crescent diadem, most shining!  
In Her hair-mass, Amitabha  
shining, with [much]light eternal!*

(The “Tara Who Bestows Auspicious Conditions,” she is red-yellow. This verse praises Tara’s crown ornament.)

*Homage! She ‘mid wreath of flames like  
eon-ending fire abiding!  
Right leg outstretched, joy-producing,  
destroying the troops of enemies!*

(Red, this Tara is referred to as “Tara Who Blazes in Flame.” It is in praise of the way in which Tara wrathfully sits.)

*Homage! She who smites the ground with  
Her palm, and with Her foot beats it!  
Frowning, with the letter HUM the  
seven underworlds She shatters!*

(Red-black, Tara is, here, the “Tara of Wrathful Gaze.” The verse praises the light that shines from HUM, the letter at her heart.)

*Homage! Happy, Virtuous, Peaceful!  
She whose field is Peace, Nirvana!  
She endowed with OM and SVAHA!  
Of the great downfall destroyer!*

(Known as “The Great Pacifier,” Tara is white in this form. This verse is in praise of Tara’s Dharmakaya aspect.)

*Homage! She bounds round with joy, and  
tearing foes’ bodies asunder!  
Luminous with the HUM-mantra,  
word-array of the ten syllables!*

(Red, this form of Tara is referred to as “Tara Who Saves By Means Of HUM.” This praises Tara’s wrathful and peaceful mantras.)

*Homage! Swift One! The foot-stamper  
with for seed the letter HUM’s shape!  
She who shakes the triple world and  
Meru, Mandara and Kailas!*

(“Tara Who Causes The Three Worlds To Tremble,” she is red-yellow in this form. This verse praises Tara for the manner in which she causes the three world to shake with her wrathfulness.)

*Homage! She in whose hand rests the  
Deer-marked moon, of deva-lake form!  
With twice-spoken TARA and PHAT  
totally dispelling poison!*

(White, this form of Tara, is known as “Tara Who Eliminates Poisons.” This praises Tara for eliminating the world’s poisons.)

*Homage! She whom god-host rulers,  
gods and kinnaras do honour!  
Joy-producing one, Her fullness  
conflict and bad dreams dispelling!*

(This form, white, is referred to as “Tara Who Eliminates Conflicts and Bad Dreams.” The verse praises Tara’s ability to eradicate disputes and bad dreams.)

*Homage! She whose eyes are bright with  
radiance of sun or full moon!  
With twice HARA and TUTTARE  
Driver-out of chronic fever!*

(Red-yellow, this form of Tara is “Tara Who Eliminates Diseases.” It praises her for abolishing epidemic disease.)

*Homage! Full of liberating  
power by set of three Realities!  
Crushing crowds of spirits, yaksas  
and corpse-raiders! Supreme! TURE!*

(White in color, she here, in this form, is “Tara Who Accomplishes All Enlightened Activities.” This praises Tara for destroying evil spirits.)

*This praise, rooted in mantras, a  
twenty-one-fold homage—for one  
Who recites it, wise and pious,  
full of faith towards the Goddess,*

*And remembers it even  
or at dawn on rising, it grants  
Ev’ry fearlessness, quells all sins,  
and destroys all bad migrations.*

*Quickly he’ll be consecrated  
by sev’n times ten million Conqu’rors.  
Gaining greatness herein, he will  
reach at last the rank of Buddha.*

*The most dreadful poison, whether  
animal, or plant or min'ral,  
Whether he's devoured or drunk it,  
meets its end through his rememb'ring.*

*It completely stops the pain of  
those whom spirits, fevers, poisons  
Afflict—other beings' also,  
On performing twice three sevens,*

*One who wants a child will get one,  
one desiring wealth will find wealth,  
One obtains all one's desires; by  
hindrances one's not frustrated.*

(These concluding lines describe the intention of the practitioner, when to do this practice, and the benefits available from this practice.)

*The Taras who protect from the eight fears*

Tara's main deeds are to remove the fears and dangers of her practitioners. As unrealized beings, we experience two kinds of fears—not getting what we want, and not being able to stop danger, threats, or other situations harmful to us. The real cause of fear, however, is our Fundamental Ignorance—our ego, grasping to an inherent self—the greater the “I” and attachment to it, the greater our fears. Living in a world that seems unable to bring aid in the midst of such despair, we thus call out to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This is where Tara best comes into play, as, “...the activity of all the Buddhas directed towards elimination of fear and danger is found within the divine person of Tara.” (Bokar Rinpoche 22)

The reality at hand, however, is that the world is a manifestation of our mind and thus, our fears are mere designations. Because all of existence has the quality of emptiness, this means that these fears can change; this is why our prayers and Tara's efforts work so well. Furthermore, when we become realized beings, designations cease and, hence, all fear is gone.

Traditionally, Tara is known for her protection against the eight fears—elephants, lions, fire, poisonous snakes, thieves, imprisonment, water, and demons. Upon closer inspection, however, each of these physical dangers come to represent something much deeper; they are symbolic of the afflictive emotions that produce negative karma, thus perpetuating our samsaric existence. Using excerpts from Taranatha's text, *The Origin of*

*Tara Tantra*<sup>21</sup>, these eight fears, as well as their greater significance will be examined in relation to Tara's involvement with them.

#### Fear of Lions:

*She is the Protectress from the Fear of Lions. A wood-gatherer went off into the forest and there he came face to face with a ravenous lioness who held him in her jaws and prepared to eat him. His hope faded away. Terrified and scared, he begged Tara to come to his assistance, and she suddenly appeared before him, clothed in leaves. She pulled him from the lioness' jaws and set him down safely in the city market-place.*

The first danger, lions ultimately symbolize pride. Due to wrong views and the resultant distorted perception, we cling to our notions of a self, an "I" onto which we heap these false realities. As a result, pride becomes manifest, further clouding our perception.

#### Fear of Elephants:

*She is the Protectress from the Fear of Elephants. A 12-year-old girl went to the forest one day to gather flowers, and there she was confronted by a fierce elephant named Kuni, who bound her in his trunk and started to crush her with his tusks. Remembering Tara's name, the girl earnestly begged her to help and Tara brought the elephant under control. The creature then put the girl up on a high stone ledge and saluted her with his trunk and, leading her away, took her to the town's market-place. Then he took her to the council chambers, the temple and around the King's palace. The King heard of this girl and her great stock of merits and took her as his Queen.*

Elephants, in this instance, come to symbolize ignorance. This ignorance, based on our mistaken mind, is blinding—creating veils through which we are unable to see the reality of all phenomena. Yet, "meditation on Arya Tara subdues the elephant of ignorance within the mind by revealing the true nature of reality, and consequently protects from the danger of the result of ignorance, which is suffering." (Mullin 86)

#### Fear of Fire:

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<sup>21</sup> Taranatha. *The Origin of Tara Tantra*. Trans. David Templeman. Library of Tibetan Works and Archives: Dharamsala, India. 1981. pages 5-8.

*She is the Protectress from the Fear of Fire. A certain householder hated his enemy (neighbor) and one night set fire to his house. The latter started to flee but could not get free—at that instant he called out, “O Tara, O Mother Tara!” A beautiful blue cloud arose above the house, and from it fell a continual shower of rain, like a yoke, on the house itself, completely quenching the flames.*

Fire is a greater representation of anger. Our distortion of reality, gives rise to afflictive emotions, such as anger. The “fires” of anger are fueled by our negative thinking—negative perceptions create negative activity and, thus, the destructive emotions that accompany them.

#### Fear of Poisonous Snakes:

*She is the Protectress from the Fear of Poisonous Snakes. In a certain city there once lived a prostitute who was given a necklace of 500 pearls. She wanted to go to the merchant’s house at midnight. Leaving her house, and while on the road there, she happened to grasp an acacia branch around which was coiled a poisonous snake, which seized her around the body. By her mere recollection of Arya Tara, the snake was transformed into a flower garland, in which form it remained for seven days. Thereafter it lost its white venom and proceeded into the river, so it is said.*

Here, snakes come to represent the poison of jealousy. Similar to the afflictive nature of anger, poison arises due to our distorted view, thus influencing our actions—allowing us to sink further into samsara.

#### Fear of Thieves:

*She is the Protectress of the Fear of Brigands. A man from a certain part of Gujarat known as Bharukaccha was a very wealthy trader. On the way to the land of Maru with about 1,000 camels and half that number of bulls, all fully laden, he found that his path went through the territory of a bandit gang which was situated in the midst of a veritable wilderness. All the previous traders who had gone there had been slain, and their flesh, blood and bones were scattered in the four directions. A myriad of these traders had been impaled on wooden stakes and the robbers who behaved like devils even ate their flesh. The (chief) trader was absolutely terrified, and as he had no other protector he begged Tara to help him. She immediately awoke in the phantom form of “Tara the heroine,” holding aloft a sword and accompanied by a huge army, Tara banished the bandits to a remote land without slaying any of them and brought the dead back to life. Accordingly, when the robbers had been scattered into isolation the trader happily set off and again arrived at Bharukaccha.*

Thieves come to represent false philosophies and, like the bandits in the story, they can attack a person and render him defenseless. These false philosophies are the culprit behind our suffering; it is the mistaken views that propagate our negative actions and the afflictive emotions that fuel them.

#### Fear of Imprisonment:

*She is the Protectress from the Fear of Prison Walls. A leader of a robber band went to the subterranean treasury of the king. There he found a jug of beer which he drank, and being bit befuddled he went to sleep. However, he was seen and seized by the king's men who flung him into a dungeon, bound up. There he underwent various sufferings. Bereft of any other protector he prayed to Tara and a five-coloured bird descended from the sky, loosened his bonds and caused the dungeon door to open by itself. Having thus been freed and once again at large, he returned to his own country. (That night) in a dream, a beautiful girl adorned with all types of ornaments arose and said to him, "If you recall my kind deed to you, then you and your followers must relinquish your thieving ways!" And so it happened that the robber and his 500 accomplices gave up their lives of crime and did many virtuous deeds instead.*

Imprisonment here symbolizes greed. We must always be mindful of others, learning to be selflessly generous and give them whatever aid they might need. Furthermore, as practitioners of Mahayana tradition, we must strive even higher—the pure altruism of bodhisattvas.

#### Fear of Water:

*She is the Protectress from the Fear of Ocean Waves. In the southern regions lived 5,000 traders, and they took three large ships and set out for the Land of Precious Things. One vessel was filled with all manner of jewels and, setting off again, the traders finally reached the Land of Yellow Sandalwood where they filled up the second boat. After that they wished to return home, but the "Treasure Holder" of the ocean was very angry with them and sent down a great windstorm which carried them far away. After crossing oceans of many different colours, they were confronted by huge, raging billows, and the merchants prayed both day and night to Brahma, Visnu, Siva, the Moon and Sun, to Kuvera and all the other divinities, but to no avail. The hawsers of the boat snapped and the vessels carrying the jewels and sandalwood were scattered. The large boat of theirs was driven to the point of sinking. Then a Buddhist Upasaka remembered Tara and in a mystic and reverend voice recited her 10-letter mantra. Immediately an agreeable wind*

*arose and the boat turned around, arriving back in India one night. The vessels carrying the jewels and the sandalwood all joined together again.*

Water is representative of the dangers of desire and attachment. With just as strong a force, desire (and the resultant attachment) carries us away in its current, keeping us lost in the relentless sea of samsara.

### Fear of Demons:

*She is the Protectress from the Dread of Flesh-eating Ogres. In the east was a temple which was the sole dwelling place for Sravakas of the Sendhapa Sect. At that time it happened that every evening each monk who went outside the temple precincts for his constitutional walk was slain, and consequently the number of those remaining inside the temple dwindled. One evening a certain novice went for his stroll when a cannibal ogre, black, ugly and baring its fangs, leapt out and grabbed him by the head. The novice remembered that Mahayanists believe Tara to be the Saviouress from the Eight Great Fears, and he thought that he would go to her as his Protectress. He cried out her name. A black goddess arose, holding a sword aloft, and she menaced the ogre with it. The ogre begged the novice for forgiveness and offered him an iron pot, stuffed full of pearls which it got from underground. Ever since then it has never harmed that temple.*

The menacing ogre is seen as symbolic of doubt and hesitation. Plagued with doubt, one is left hesitant and timid in one's actions. Tara, on the other hand, is here to save us from this affliction, leading us to a confident existence, hinged upon enlightened activity.

### Visions of Tara in Action: Profiles of Five women

Much as the foundational two truths of Buddhism suggests, there is not a sole, static mode of existence by which all phenomena is manifested on this earth. For this very reason, I sought to speak with numerous different women, all within the framework of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, to catch a glimpse at the reality that lies behind life as a Buddhist woman, especially in regards to the worship of a female deity. While my research could have been made more comprehensive by speaking with members of the lay community as well, I choose to focus on five ordained women—two of whom are Westerners who have integrated within the Tibetan exile community. My intentions for detailing the information gathered in my interviews as profiles (or, if you will, case studies), rather than distributing as sources for previously discussed subject matter lie in the fact that I find it important to allow a venue for these women and their voices to be heard. Allow me to clarify that I am not, in any way, trying to allude that these women are not able to do this on their own, or that they are not presently doing so. (In fact, I would beg to differ.) What I merely hope to do is, rather than impute my own biases—although not intentional, they are, albeit, inherent to my existence as a Western woman, attending a Western college, and prescribing to Western philosophies on social and religious constructs—serve as a forum by which these women can, simply, speak for themselves, untainted by veils of interpretation. It is my only hope that I am able to accurately convey what has been shared with me, and may it be of some benefit in terms

of bringing clarity to the reality of Tara as a central female deity and her role in terms of affecting the women who worship her.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> What follows is not a direct transcript of my conversations. Through my notes, I have reconstructed a paraphrasing of what each woman said, and have inserted direct quotations as well. Please note that the concepts and wordings are accurate to that which was shared with me; it is paraphrased only because I am simply unable to quote each woman in full.

## Sangye Khadro

It was a typically pleasant day in McLeod Ganj when I met with Sangye Khadro. Seated in the shade, side by side on the bench of a picnic table, we met at Tushita Meditation Center, where Ani-la<sup>23</sup> offers her services as a teacher. Born in California as Kathleen McDonald, Ani-la was ordained in 1974 at Kopan Monastery in Nepal and in 1988 received her full ordination of Gelongma vows.

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Tara was once a princess named Yeshe Dawa, who generated wishes to be offered to the Buddha.<sup>24</sup> Yeshe Dawa refused advise on praying for a male birth, saying that there were lots of people in the male form, working for enlightenment, and therefore, she would do it as a woman, and made a vow to do so. Yes, Tara most certainly exists as a role model for woman, and her presence is quite nice for today and all times throughout history. Women always need inspiring examples, and it is important to see women achieving great things. It is also important to point out that Tara is not exclusive to women; many male practitioners have Tara as their main deity, and reap great benefit from her guidance.

It is hard to believe 100% in such stories. However, Tara's vow is particularly appealing, as there really is no inherent male or female. Often times, we are so hung up on the physical body, yet it is in the highest state that we transcend the physical.

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<sup>23</sup> Ani-la is a respectful way of addressing an ordained woman in Tibetan. From this point onward, I will refer to each woman as "Ani-la."

<sup>24</sup> While she didn't recall too many great details, Ani-la did remember a "nice bit" about some monks who advised the princess to pray to be born male.

Enlightenment is, after all, a state of mind. Finding such conventions to be meaningless and to be able to put aside those designations, as demonstrated by Tara's vow, is inspiring. Furthermore, it is important that Tara actually went on to do it, especially in light of the fact that in so many traditions, one has to be male in order to achieve greatness. This highlights the teachings of Tantra, which show us that it is possible in any form, and it is promising to see that it is, indeed, tangible to even us.

Surmising as to why Tara is so popular and why so many practitioners feel a special connection to her, Tara is known as "The Quick One;" when we pray to her, we get quick answers. She makes it efficient, and offers us a quick fix. Moreover, she is a strong mother figure. Mother devotion is so deeply ingrained in us; our mothers bring us into the world, feed us, care for us, and show us unconditional love. In return, we learn to look at our mothers with great devotion and love, calling out to them in times of need. Even big strong men, soldiers in battle have cried out for their mother. Calling out to Tara, we address her as "Mother!" Women are naturally more compassionate; given the physical means by which to give birth, they simply *have* to be compassionate in order to care for a small creature. Thus, it appears that this quality just seems natural for women to embody. And when you are looking for help, you want somebody who is kind, compassionate, and understanding.

I first learned of Tara back in 1973, when I came to Dharamsala to study Buddhism. For five months, I attended classes at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, where, once a day, Tara prayers and mantras were recited. While I didn't really know how to relate, I had good feelings about this practice, and was open to whatever they were teaching.

There had been a woman in the community who had previously been away in retreat but had re-entered society. One night, the woman snapped, and all the neighbors were trying to help calm her down. I was, at the time, living near the library, and on this evening, received a knock on the door from a Tibetan man who had come for help. The woman had started throwing rocks, scaring all who were trying to bring her comfort. Although frightened myself, I came out to help. Soon, however, it seemed that nothing could be done, and I retired back to my room. Unable to sleep, I remembered Tara. Seated on my bed, with a candle lit, I recited the Tara mantra I had learned, and prayed to Tara, asking her to come to this lady and to help her find peace. Suddenly, I realized that the noise had died down, and that the lady had been calmed. Putting her to bed, I thought to myself, “Wow, this seems to work!” This experience gave me confidence in Tara, enabling me to trust that, should I need to call on somebody, I could think of Tara.

Another example of Tara and the function of prayer is that of a woman who was living in Singapore. For ten years she tried and tried to conceive a child. Though using every method she was capable of calling on, she still could not become pregnant. Almost casually, I suggested she pray to Tara, who is known for her ability to bless devotees with children. The woman took the suggestion to heart and, within a mere couple of months, she found herself pregnant. Prayer is “watering any good karmic seeds we may have.” Therefore, it is not like Tara swoops down to give, much like the creator God that is lacking in Buddhist tradition. Rather, we need to have the proper karmic formations in already in place—thus, if we pray and do not receive, it is not as if Tara gives to some and ignores others. Instead, we need the karma that will allow our prayers to come to fruition. Concurrently, as we make prayer a part of our practice, we are able to generate

more and more positive karma, and, in effect, rid ourselves of negative karmic influences (the very kind that limits the far-reaching effects of our prayers).

It is often difficult to relate to deities, and while I am familiar with how they are described in various texts, I still struggle with my faith and my perception of it. I don't know if Tibetans feel the same way, given that they are, most of the time, quite familiar with these deities even since birth. As Westerners, we are taught to be skeptical. Yet, when doubts are put aside and practice is maintained, I have a good feeling about it; what that is, I can't really name, but it's a good feeling nonetheless.

Tara shows us what we are capable of; while we only see our faults, she elucidates the change that we can make within ourselves. Deity meditation is a very skillful psychological method, allowing us to "get in touch with the potential we have." We are able to be more compassionate, and this is precisely what these deities are meant for. Though slow, this method is effective—moreover, it has to be that way; change does not happen overnight. By seeing what we are capable of, we will not cling to poor self images that are destructive. If we believe in the potential of our good qualities, we will achieve them!

My experiences are different from what you might find in speaking with a Tibetan woman. Yet, while many women in the exile community are busily spending their days caring for family and home, there is evidence of the faith within the community. While they might not study the subtleties of the philosophy, they display a commitment to their devotion and practice.

As far as trying to see how gender has affected practice, "It's hard to know, I've only been a woman in this life." In all seriousness though, in comparison with other

traditions, women are relatively pretty well off in Tibetan Buddhism. Although there are difficulties in the role of an attendant to a teacher (being that it might pose problems for a woman to become too close to a male teacher), I have never felt discriminated, certainly regarding the ability to receive and give teachings. For Tibetan nuns, however, there have, traditionally, been more obstacles and difficulties, yet times are changing, and Tibetan women are getting more opportunities and access to the dharma.

It is refreshing to hear the dharma from a woman, and that both men and women have commented on that to me as a teacher. In the Tibetan tradition it is mostly men who are teachers, thus, leaving little opportunity for women. Today, there is an increasing number of female teachers, yet numbers are still low. But gender is only a construct of the body. A great teacher transcends the body, offering the best of both sexes. Every person has both female and male within them, and Tantra enables us to get in touch with both, fulfilling both aspects of our self. Unfortunately, people usually try to find that other half by entering relationships, always searching for something to fulfill them. But when we get in touch with our own potential, it is possible to “become a whole complete person in yourself,” rather than forming needy attachments onto another.

There is not a way of practice that is “female” versus one that is “male.” Practice is about mind, and that cannot be gendered into separate qualitiveness. Practice is a means by which one works to decrease negative aspects, and attempts to increase the positive qualities of love and compassion. As part of our mind, this becomes universal, and, moreover, when it comes to the mind, there is no difference in how men and women practice.

### Ani Tenzin Palmo

A Western nun who had, at one time, spent twelve years in retreat in a cave in Lahaul, India, Ani Tenzin Palmo is now spending her days as the founder of a nunnery in northern India.

Seated in her personal residence, facing her as she sat cross-legged, surrounded by bright and ornate thankas, I had the great fortune of speaking privately with Ani-la. Our interview, as with most all of the other I conducted, followed a similar line of questioning as those previously detailed. Although personally not a strict Tara devotee, Ani-la had much to offer in regards to her perceptions of this female deity and her role in Tibetan Buddhism. She does, however, perform Tara practice with her nuns (reciting the Twenty-One Praises) and when sick (as suggested by a Lama). When I asked her how she had come to learn of Tara, Ani-la remarked that it is hard to recall; Tara is so much a part of Tibetan Buddhism, so integral, that it is almost as if trying to locate when one first heard OM MANI PADME HUM. Ani-la's mother, however, was very devoted to White Tara, and Ani-la also had a friend living in China who was devoted to Green Tara. She surmises she heard of Tara through the combination of these two sources.

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Tara was born from two tears of Avalokitesvara, who tried and tried to rescue suffering beings. Yet seeing so many cascading down into samsara, he was deeply despaired and began to cry. It is interesting that Avalokitesvara has come to symbolize

compassion, being that compassion is traditionally seen as a very female aspect and Avalokitesvara is a male. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Tara, a woman, was born from Avalokitesvara, a male—thus, a role reversal.

Yet there was a need for a woman in Tibetan Buddhism, a strong need for a mother, and while both men and women have this quality, ultimately, it is Tara that manifests this quality much stronger. While Lord Buddha and Avalokitesvara are loved and revered by many, there are more accounts of ordinary people having visualizations of Tara. It's similar in Christianity—everyone loves and worships Jesus, but more often, you hear of sightings of Mary. Tara is like a mother, she is always there to care for you. Similarly, one doesn't need to reach up to her—she will reach down for you. This is, perhaps, why she is so popular with everybody.

The nice thing about Tara is her twenty one aspects of manifestation, depicted in many colors and forms. These variations allow Tara to be multifaceted, enabling her to appear in whatever form is necessary to best help. While she will always show up as needed, she will not always be smiling and happy, but, rather, sometimes manifest as angry and fierce. Yet, again, like a mother, we know that this is done out of pure love and compassion. The Mahayana tradition is “not a male only trip,” and it is nice to see female bodhisattvas and Buddhas, compared to the Theravada tradition, where there is little mention of women, few women teachers and masters, and is, instead, a very male oriented path. Tara shows us that women can reach a high level within the tradition, and that women are worthy of respect.

It's hard to say if Tara is empowering for women—early women did not think of her as explicitly empowering. It's like comparing yourself with Mary; “I mean, they

could, but they didn't." In Tibet, nuns are especially seen to be related with Tara and seen to have a direct line. The Twenty-One Praises as well as Tara ritual are performed in nunneries, and nuns are normally hired to perform such ceremonies. While people associate a connection between nuns and Tara herself, it is important to note that nuns do many practices, and are not limited to the confines of that particular association.

With regards to the question of feminine spirituality, it is crucial to note that Buddha nature is genderless. Additionally, it can be said that women have "male spirituality" and vice-versa. In light of this, however, many lamas and researchers have said that women are more superior in meditation. A woman's mind is more volatile and, thus, more discursive; women can take that energy and concentrate and direct it. Doing so, women can go up and advance much faster than men. Perhaps, then, there is a "feminine mind." Women are more intuitive, whereby men are more analytical, going step by step, and, as a result, "less able to just let go and fly." Yet with some men, the feminine side of their nature is naturally expressed, most especially those with an open mind, such as artists. And it is these men who like Tara.

We all need to balance the two sides of masculine and feminine. With nuns, we strive to enhance the masculine side, giving them opportunities to study, debate, and improve their education. Nuns enter into retreat for two months of the year, and after their preliminary studies are completed they are given the option of either studying further, or going into more serious retreat. Through this, that side of being is brought into nature, whereas, previously, it has never even been explored. And by developing the other, we become more well-balanced. "Women should feel confident...their nature...is naturally conducive to profound meditation and realization." But without the opportunity

of an education, women can't explain what they have realized. Given education, on the other hand, women can enhance their meditation, can help others, and can teach. This is imperative, since, with men writing the books, we never hear about the women who do reach high levels of realization.

Tara has much to offer and teach to her practitioners. She gives us unconditional love and compassion, and her actions to help all beings are done fearlessly. This has a profound influence on practitioners, regardless of gender; we can all relate to her, and can all look to her for inspiration in our practice. Additionally, she offers herself as a mother, free from judgment or conditional love. There is great emphasis on her willingness to help, even if you've done wrong. However awful you may feel you are, she is there for you.

It is this unconditionality, this nonjudgment, that leads so many to love her so deeply. She is very direct in her outreach, and the devotion felt towards her is widespread—both men and women feel the same devotion for her. With many feeling a strong heart connection with her, one does not have to be a great practitioner, a monk, or a nun to get joy from Tara.<sup>25</sup> With other deities you must work so hard, or be at a high level of practice. Tara, on the other hand, is always there! She is so immediate, this particular female force.

With regards to what women offer to the dharma that is unique, women can bring the more practical aspect of being. Take, for example, Chen Yen, a Taiwanese nun. A seemingly small and ordinary nun, she felt that it was not enough to just meditate on

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<sup>25</sup> To prove her point on the availability of Tara to even the most elementary of practitioners, Ani-la shared a story of an experience had by her mother. On the morning of the day she was to receive a Tara empowerment, Ani-la's mother had a vision of Tara. Glowing and white, Tara reached out and handed her a lotus.

compassion. We need to act! Chen Yen went on to found an organization, known as “Compassion Relief Tzu Chi,” with three million followers. Together, they have built hospitals and schools, provided disaster relief, and helped the poor and less fortunate. Examining people like Chen Yen, we see that they are so happy—there is a genuine joy in giving, and in sharing love with all sentient beings.

Buddhism, sometimes, is too passive; there is not enough *action*. By demonstrating morals in everyday life and applying meditative problem solving you can make a difference. This is what women can bring to the Dharma—the act of *doing*, rather than simply debating or thinking. Sure, there are the sixteen different kinds of compassion, but don’t just sit and meditate on it; “I mean forget it. Go out and show it.”

What does Tara have to offer in terms of these ideals? “I think she represents it.” She embodies compassion, even more so than Avalokitesvara—she is the most immediate. There are countless stories of her coming to help, showing herself, appearing to those that need her. She exemplifies the concept of *being there*, not just meditating. She is there to help. She *is* the practical.

There is feminine energy in the universe. There is light and love and intelligence. But it is hard, as a practitioner, to relate to something so abstract. It is for this reason that Tara appears to us in form. In reality though, Tara is not external. Rather, she is the reflection of the true nature of ourselves. In deity meditation, many people come across problems when trying to conceptualize this. We sit down and say to ourselves, “Okay, I’m Mary Smith and I’m going to pretend to be Tara now.” But, in truth, “really we are Tara, pretending to be Mary Smith.” These deities show us our innate nature—all beings are, thus, Tara. The deities are not separate. They are not up above us, calling us to

worship them. They are there to help us recognize our true being. Your mind and the deity's mind are one; all things are within the mandala of existence. We are not separate or dualistic from these deities; they are not one to whom we pray to outside ourself.

Women symbolize the nature of wisdom, our innate wisdom mind. So, therefore, without her, there is no Buddha nature. Women are beginning to wake up to their own potential. This is creating a powerful effect on the future of Buddhism—not just in the West, but in Asia as well. With more education, women can know their own potential, and can teach others and themselves; in effect, putting the Dharma in a different context.

## Lhondup Choedon

Born in Tibet and fleeing to live in exile, Lhondup Choedon was only six years old when she decided she wanted to become a nun. Forced to wait until she turned nine, Ani-la is now 22 and the top student in her class at the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics, Sarah Campus. Graciously offering me half an hour of her busy exam week time, Ani-la and I met in her room, where we casually talked about gender, Tara, and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as a whole.

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With Tara, if we need something, anything, we pray to her. She was a female goddess in Tibet at the time Chenrezig came. Intending to take all to enlightenment, he saw so many still suffering, and became so sad, full of despair. Thinking he could not do anything, that it all was so hard, he began to cry. As he cried, a tear fell, and, from that tear, the goddess Tara appeared. Sent by Lord Buddha, Tara had come to help with all the suffering. Today, Tara comes in twenty-one forms, appearing as a girl in white, green, and many other colors. Even for ordinary people, if we call to her, she will come.

At one point in Tibet, the ministers believed in Bön, and burned and destroyed all Buddhist images and temples. For 411 years, there were no kings and no Buddhism. Then, a holy lama invited a monk from Nalinda, named Atisha. As a very important monk, Atisha was not going to be allowed to leave. Seeking guidance, Atisha asked Tara what he should do. She told him that if he goes to Tibet, he will do many things for

suffering beings. But if he goes, ten years will be removed from his life. After praying to Tara, Atisha decided to go to Tibet, and by doing so, brought the dharma with him, restoring it as the state religion.<sup>26</sup>

When it comes to women and men in Buddhism, women are more intelligent, but they are indecisive and passive. In comparison, men are better in the way of their deeds and actions, especially compassion.<sup>27</sup> Tibetan traditional medicine claims that there is a male pulse and female pulse, but there is no advantage to that. *Buddhism* is the advantage, not necessarily being a man or being a woman. For men, it is a little easier though, and their actions are more important, so in some ways, it is a little different. Women, though, pay attention to other things that men do not usually notice.

Tara, though, came to help Chenrezig, and she serves to help all beings from suffering. She is so quick to help if called on! She encourages women. If women have no goal, they can point to Tara and look to her as inspiration and have her as a role model. Monks get more opportunities; they get more teachings and they have the abilities to get Geshe degrees. But you can see change. There are nuns taking philosophy courses. His Holiness said that if women have the ability, they can have the opportunity to do so. His Holiness even said that he may be reborn as a woman. If, as a woman, he can do better things to help more sentient beings, than he will be born female. In the past, women had no rights. Today they are equal. Maybe the women will dominate. Maybe His Holiness will be born as a woman.

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<sup>26</sup> Ani-la recalls when she was about sixteen or seventeen years old, and learning about Buddhism in school. That night, she had a dream about Atisha and, to this day, unable to forget it, the dream has stayed in her mind.

<sup>27</sup> Ani-la, though, did admit that she had not heard anything about nuns as far as great achievements or them doing anything special. She stated that she only hears about the deeds of monks.

Maybe there are some differences between men and women teachers, but it can be possible that both monks and nuns are equally good. If you have a connection with your teacher, if you have the right karma, it will show how well you will learn. Your link to your teacher will show how good they will be.

To relate to deities we must have patience and have a good connection. If not, it's okay—it's not an easy thing. Maybe it won't happen in one life, maybe it will take more. Gods are all around us—there is no difference in them, just different statues of them—but because of our own ignorance we are unable to see this. We have to meditate to have the ability to grasp this. This is not an ordinary quality. We must be more hardworking, and have full faith in God, but don't become discouraged. Prayer doesn't help you to get anything. Pray to show your belief in God as the only one to help in your suffering. By making offerings and praying to Tara, you can develop her compassion. "If we pray, God is everywhere."

### Delek Yangdon and Dekyi Dolma

I first met Delek, 35 years old, while participating in a hunger strike in the streets of McLeod Ganj. Seated with other nuns from her nunnery, Dolma Ling, Delek's warm smile and kind gestures were a welcome respite from the monotony of spending twenty-four hours sitting in the street. Exchanging contact information, I later visited her at Dolma Ling, where we sat in the computer room and talked. Delek learned of Tara from her studies. She has a book that has the Tara story, as well as details on Tara in relation to the Eight fears.

As we chatted, a friendly face peeked in the door and came in to say hello. A friend of Delek's, Dekyi was just as kind in offering her time to speak to me about Tara and the reality of what it is like to be a woman in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. Dekyi, 38 years old, became a nun in 1995, and is originally from Taiwan.

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### Delek Yangdon

Avalokitesvara was very sad. Looking out to all the creatures, he wanted to help, but he looked at them and only saw sorrow. He cried, and as a tear fell down to the ground, Tara grew from the drop. Coming to save from fears, she says to Avalokitesvara, "Don't be sad," and helps him.

There was a king who had a daughter. Her name was Yeshe Dawa. She had great respect for the dharma and was a very beautiful girl. Nearby, there was a Buddha. Many

joined a sangha around him, and Yeshe Dawa would make offerings to them. The Bhikus would say to her, “If you work for Buddhism and pray, you can make your prayers come true.” They told her many times to pray to be a man. The princess said that, “here, there is no man or woman.” People are boys or girls just because we say so, not because they truly are. Tara also thought that on earth there are many man practicing for enlightenment to become Buddha, but not many women doing that. She said, “I am going to do this, being a girl. I would like to do this.” She wanted to do this for all sentient beings, and for them, would become a Buddha and help until samsara is empty. If it is not empty, she would continue to be a girl, doing everything for sentient beings. She made this promise, and went to her father’s palace to meditate. Although there were many mistakes in her mind, she kept it up, and realized emptiness. She then was able to save many sentient beings.

### Dekyi Dolma

Our mind makes many mistakes. It says things are like “that,” but it is not really like how it is. If we wear glasses that are green and look at the mountains, the snow will look green. If they are red, the snow will be red. If we look with our natural eye, the snow is white. “Now we don’t have the pure mind, so we don’t see the things like they are.” Not seeing things as they are is just like wearing glasses. Tara shows this.

Tara practice is done at Dolma Ling for an hour in the morning and evening and for a half hour before debate. We also pray personally every day. Tara practice is good for women and for everybody too. Tara made the promise to help sentient beings and to

become a Buddha to save them from suffering. If we are uncertain, we can pray and she will save us. In Taiwan, everybody prays to Dolma. Even in China she is the most well-known deity, even through history. In Chinese thought, people know Dolma more than Buddha. Mothers always tell their children to call out to her—if there is any danger, pray to Tara. And at that moment, they do not think of the Buddha, they think of Tara.

If women are not nuns, they have no good opportunity to learn about Buddhism. If they are a nun, they can do what the Buddha taught. As a girl, you have to take care of your family, you have to have a child; there are many many things to do. This is why you are not able to learn Buddhism and are not able to thoroughly devote yourself to practice. Before, only monks had teachers and books. Now we all have this. We are equal. In Tibet there may be a difference in treatment. Women don't get an education and don't have resources. They just didn't get the opportunity. Now, we have the opportunity. At the public teachings of His Holiness, you could not see a difference. "We drink the same tea. We eat the same food. We listen to the same teachings."

Women are not able to get a Geshe degree because they don't have the opportunity. They are not highly educated enough to be able to. If they are highly educated, they will. Now we are doing this. Now we have education. In several years, we may see a female Geshe. "We all hope this." To get the opportunity to learn, to become a Geshe, we can benefit many nuns by having many students. If we want to be a Geshe, we will *be* a Geshe. We don't want just the name. If you really improve your education and practice Buddhism well, then the Geshe name is not important.

### Theoretical Vs. Reality: A Reconciliation

After an examination of the major facets of Tara's manifestation, I now ask, "Where does that leave the practitioner?" What are we to make of Tara, this supreme deity, so dearly beloved? What are we to make of the tradition of which she is a part of, or, perhaps, what will the tradition allow her to be?

In light of examining the roles that Tara plays, existing as a major force in Tibetan Buddhism, it appears that there is no easy answer. Through my comparison of what the textual analects of Tara have to offer, set against the actual experiences of female practitioners, it appears that there are still some disparities at hand. I propose, however, that these disparities only make themselves present on certain levels of truth and perception.

Some might say that for Tibetan Buddhism to have a profound effect, it must allow itself to be shaped by the issues that affect its very practitioners. This, however would also call for a complete reevaluation of the culture and society in which the philosophy is present—could the two ever be isolated? In the face of its growing popularity in the West, Tibetan Buddhism has come under close scrutiny as of late, and it appears there is a double standard:

Not only did this form of Buddhism offer a game-plan for the spiritual progress of the individual, through meditation techniques and moral practices, but it also provided texts whose metaphysical philosophies genuinely seemed to give alternative and enlightening perspectives on the nature of the human condition and, in particular, the relationship between men and women....For many women, the possibility of being part of a tradition which saw equality in different terms from occidental religious systems, seemed to suggest that the limiting nature of gender, as they had experienced it, was truly inconsequential. (Campbell 28-29)

Yet, what about the absence of women in authoritative positions? What about the lack of full ordination for nuns within the framework of the Tibetan schools? What about the

disparity of having a strong female iconographic figure (Tara) and the obvious societal limitations imposed upon women? We have religious iconography holding “woman” as exalted and deserving of reverence, but this is all within the context of a society that has failed to transfer this philosophical equality to women, thus creating a schism between the two worlds. (30)

This proves problematic when Tibetan culture undergoes historical analysis. Throughout its existence, Tibetan society has maintained a theocracy—thus, no secular/religious divide. All early literature, therefore, has been religious texts. Typically, historical documents are a key way of identifying the role of women in society, as seen through the changes and modifications over generations. Usually, historians can compare religious texts to secular ones and are then enabled to observe changing attitudes, as noted in the distinction between the two sphere of life. With Tibet, however, documents are only able to offer a religious perspective, therefore, making it difficult to conceptualize the “actual” versus the “theoretical”—it simply isn’t addressed. (31-32)

Taking a cue from the Western philosophies of first and second wave feminism, attempts at addressing gender disparities still seem to fall short of the intended goal. By working to establish a place for women within their society and religious tradition, one is still bound within the confines of that system—one is, in essence, seeking for women’s equality, while maintaining patriarchal principles. Yet when a withdrawal from society is suggested, thus creating a unique feminine space, one runs into the problems of the concept of “female identity”; how can a society even define that which is “woman” or “feminine?” By doing so, and thus creating a rigid, static conception of what is “female,” that society would be overlooking the numerous differences that exist even within the

women themselves. Furthermore, by establishing “woman” as that which is not “male,” we are still confined within the system. Or, in dharma rhetoric, we are still hung up on the designations made in conventional thought.

What I see as the central error in this mode of analysis is that we have the audacity to ascribe our Western imputation onto Eastern philosophies:

For anyone, feminist or otherwise, who wishes to step into the spiritual power of a contemplative tradition like Tibetan Buddhism, a certain nakedness is required. One’s politics, convictions, gender identity, and emotions are exposed to a perspective that transcends all other aspects of one’s identity. Yet all are potent fuel for the spiritual journey. If one is ready to include every political instinct, every conviction, every emotional reaction in one’s spiritual practice, staying with all the painful aspects, there is possibility transformation, both personal and situational. Only this can heal the gender wars in American Buddhism.

When political or oppositional methods are carried into religion, religious communities are the battleground. This has been the case in recent developments in American Buddhism, which threaten the transmission of Buddhist teachings. Certainly, there are important aspects to this warfare: the social and political dimensions of patriarchal institutional religion need adjustment in order to respond to concerns about gender equality. *But there is enormous danger that the gender wars will obscure the central point of a spiritual path.* (italics mine) (Simmer-Brown)

The beauty of Tibetan Buddhism is what it has to offer—we are all equal in our potential. The “heart of awakening” is present in all of us; universal, it cannot be gendered. It is the quintessence of emptiness, and, for this reason, can be applied to all people. Existing as common to all sentient beings, this power to awaken, hidden deep away, like a seed waiting to sprout, has no distinction in quality; there is no “male” potential, no “female” potential, and moreover, no level of comparison between different beings.

The “heart of awakening” will not sufficiently lead one to liberation merely on its own accord; it needs the support of other conditions. For awakening to occur, one must possess two foundational qualities: human existence, and the “ten indispensable conditions.” Five of these conditions are inherent in our person—being of human

condition, having been born in a country where the dharma has reached, possession of all senses enough to allow understanding of the dharma, not holding an occupation that conflicts with Buddhist precepts, and having sincere faith in the Triple Gem of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The other five conditions are outside factors; a Buddha must have manifested on Earth, He or She must have expounded the dharma, that teaching must be alive, it, additionally must be known, and the structures spreading the teachings have support from disciples. It is then said that when the heart of awakening, in combination with the ten conditions, is applied with the proper effort and dedication, anyone is able to attain enlightenment. This is particularly powerful, when set in context—as dictated by Lord Buddha, 2500 years ago, when a female birth was explicitly seen as inferior, *it lacks any mention of gender distinctions*. Therefore, given this realization, we can see that, ultimately, *it is one's practice, not one's gender, that gives rise to a higher mode of perception and existence*. (Bokar Rinpoche 125-126)

Furthermore, as suggested earlier, attachments onto perceptions of “male” and “female” only perpetuate the false views of the “I” versus the “other.” It demonstrates a clinging onto the ego. It is conventional thinking, and only exists as truth on that level. And, might I add, these designations only perpetuate the hindrances that come with this level of understanding.

Therefore, with regards to Tara, it appears that this is precisely what she has to offer us. As the embodiment of renunciation, the cultivation of bodhicitta, and the wisdom realizing emptiness, Tara is universally beneficial. It is through the adherence of these three paths, not social conventions, that we, as practitioners, can only hope to reach

realization.<sup>28</sup> It is important to keep in mind that, because Buddha nature encompasses all, Tara can and does appear in all aspects, depending on what best suits the needs of sentient beings. If a woman feels discouraged about gender, then Tara can appear as a woman to help serve as a role model—even Shakyamuni Buddha can appear in the female aspect in order to best encourage practitioners. In the same sense, Tara can appear as a man, for the same sort of reasons. Hence, “in that case, it is not so important,” and, instead, we must, “always try to get away from the creation of dualistic concepts.”<sup>29</sup> Is Tara empowering to women? Sure, but more so, she’s empowering for anyone; “She’s a Buddha, she has no partiality.”<sup>30</sup> Showering her rain without bias, whoever has the seed will become nourished and grow.

Because of our Fundamental Ignorance, our tendency is to treasure and cherish the “self” as we grasp onto our notions of an ego. By doing so, we thus create a separation between ourselves and others, generating a deluded attachment to ourselves and deluded anger and resentment towards others. This leads to negative actions, which gives rise to karma that will perpetuate our existence in samsara—and all because of dualistic thinking. This is exactly the point that Tara was making when she made her vow, ignoring the advice of the monks, and seeking liberation as a woman; because, ultimately, *what is gender but a mere designation?*

This might be fine and well for those who have reached that level of realization, where the mind ceases to make designations. What then, to the rest of us, still living within the limitations of conventions, can practitioners do to acknowledge this higher truth? Let us terminate our categorization of “male”/“female”—in truth, countless

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, Geshe Dorji Damdul. 10 May 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, Geshe Dorji Damdul. 6 May 2004.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

divisions can be made, but doing this will only create more disturbances in our mind. We are, in truth, the cause of our own suffering. As far as living amongst the conventions of samsara, it is most important that we are certain to practice the cultivation of bodhicitta, sharing our compassion with others and, at the same time, working to grasp the wisdom that realizes emptiness.

Through my textual research and the conversations had with women deeply involved in the tradition, it appears that, yes, Tara does indeed exist on two planes, both of which are important and worthwhile in gaining an understanding of who Tara is and what she has to offer us. I suppose then, that the manner in which Tara is “empowering” depends on which plane one chooses to view her existence. If our relationship with Tara, as a female, empowers us and leads to greater practice, then so be it. Perhaps this may be the nudge we need to advance further, until we are able to ascertain the quality of emptiness that grants us to see beyond “male” and “female.” It is this that brings us to the second plane—one of higher truth, free from conventions. Tara, thus, exceeds our expectations of her as a “female deity” within a traditionally patriarchal philosophy. Not only is she more than just a “female deity,” but she’s more than a “male” one; she supercedes gender. She supercedes duality. And ultimately, she challenges us all to do the same.

## Appendix



Tara statue outside of Mahabodi temple, Bodhgaya, India.  
*(photo courtesy of Jonathan Loar, May 2004)*



Green Tara thanka  
*(photo courtesy of Sarika Singh)*



Painted Tara image and mantra, Tso Pema  
*(photo by Allison Mull)*



Nuns debating at Dolma Ling Nunnery  
*(photo by Allison Mull)*



White Tara

*(Image courtesy of Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition)*

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#### Gaden Choeling Nunnery

Jogiwara Road

McLeod Ganj

District Kangra (H.P.) INDIA  
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Karma Drubgyu Thargay Nunnery

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Thosamling Institute

*(a nunnery/retreat centre for Western nuns in India)  
currently still in construction*

C/o Raj Kumar  
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