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## **Buddhist Tantric Theology? The genealogy and soteriology of Tārā**

Bee Scherer, PhD

Professor of Religious Studies and Gender Studies

Director of the *INCISE Research Centre*, <http://incise.center>

Canterbury Christ Church University, CT1 1QU, U.K., [b.scherer@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:b.scherer@canterbury.ac.uk)

### **Introduction: The many levels of female enlightened embodiment**

'Theology' (see Raphael 1998) within the Judeo-Christian, (neo-)gnostic and (neo-)pagan traditions can be seen as a feminist religious subversion of patriarchy. Theology stresses nurturing, motherhood and wisdom; identity with creation; the body and the embodied spiritual journey; the nature in female form, archetypes and mythopoëises in aid of liberating women (and men) from patriarchal silencing, power, and oppression. Theological narratives have employed empowering female divine archetypes including Ishtar, Isis, Gaia, Demeter, Diana, Sophia, and the Virgin Mary. The latter has emerged as the one focus of contemporary Feminist Christian Theology (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007: 63-80). For instance, in Latin American 'matriarchal' popular Catholicism (Pike 2002: 450-451), the Virgin Mary functions as a vehicle of subversion of male power (Chant 2003: 9-13). I argue that Tārā can provide (and is indeed already providing) such an empowering counter-patriarchal theological frame in contemporary global Buddhist (post-)modernism(s).

The Indic and Tibetan Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions approach enlightened female compassion in the form of the 'Saviouress' (Tārā; Tib. sgrol ma). She first appears as an auxiliary figure to Avalokiteśvara, who, in contrast to his East Asian transformation as Guānyīn 觀音 or Guānshìyīn 觀世音, fully remains male gendered in South Asia and the Himalayas. In this paper I discuss some key features of Buddhist Tārā 'praxis' (*practice-cum-theo/ology*, see Payne 2004, 3-5) in the Indic and Tibetan Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, in particular as presented through praises and meditation texts, and explore the potential for Tantric Theology.

The many devotional and meditational enlightened wisdom aspects (*jñānasattva* Tib. ye shes sems dpa) or 'deities' (*deva*; *iṣṭādevatā*, Tib. yi dam) of Indic and Tibetan Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism can be meaningfully described according to the Tantric hermeneutical principles of outer, inner and secret meanings. The outer theological level is exoteric,

saṃsāric and 'karmatic' in orientation; here, the goddess Tārā is the embodiment of female enlightened compassion. She rivals Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *spyan ras gzigs*, 'Chenresig') in popularity in Tibetan Buddhism, her ten-syllable mantra - being classed as non-secret - is second in ubiquity in devotional representations and practice only to her male counterpart's six-syllable *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*. In popular Tibetan Buddhism, Tārā provides a female pole to Avalokiteśvara's (meta-)male embodiment of the four immeasurable qualities or 'four divine abiding' (*catvāri-brahmavihāra*): loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and impartiality/equanimity (*upekṣā*). Chenresig's deeply theological conception as embodiment of (the male) *upāya-kauśalya* (skilful means) tends to be set off with Tārā's practical, interventional compassion. While both aspects are seen as liberating from *saṃsāra* and are also invoked in situations of saṃsāric perils, Tibetan devotees tend to turn to Tārā more for protection in mundane situations – in particular the so-called eight great dangers (see below) ; many Tibetan monasteries of the gSar ma ('new dissemination' post 10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) lineages (Kagyū, Sakya and Gelug) perform daily Tārā liturgies; at the heart of these *pūjās* is the repetition of a famous *stotra*, the *Praise of the Twenty-one forms of Tārā* (*Ārya-tārā-namaskāraikaviṃśati-stotra*). This ritual poem combines trans-saṃsāric soteriology with all-day apotropaic practice. Another layer is added to the 'nirvāṇic' or 'bodhi-oriented' soteriological theology of Tārā by the application of the important Mahāyāna polar gender imagery of wisdom (*prajñā*, female) and *upāya* ('means', male), which function as complements in Mahāyāna concepts of enlightenment. Viewed from this perspective, Tārā becomes equated with the embodied *prajñā*. Here, the popular compassion deity Tārā is identified and succeeds the personification of the *Perfection of Wisdom*, Prajñāpāramitā as the 'mother of the Buddhas' (see below) : Prajñāpāramitā equates to and personifies the key Mahāyāna philosophical concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). The equation Tārā - Prajñāpāramitā represents a second level of theo/a-logy and practice. A final, tantric level of Tārā-theology is formed by the overlap of the exoteric Tārā with the *ḍākinī Vajrayoginī* (*-vārahī*), the esoteric (and wrathful, *ugra*) consort of the principle tantric deity (*heruka*) in the highest yoga tantric Cakrasaṃvara tradition (cf. English 2002, 25). In advanced tantric theology the *ḍākinī* is the soteriologically necessary giver of knowledge, powers and inspiration and embodies a complex fourfold function as firstly expression of emptiness, as the mother of all Buddhas (as does the exoteric Tārā- Prajñāpāramitā); then the mystical consort of the tantric practitioner and his *yidam* (from an androcentric

perspective); further the granter of initiation; and finally as goddess of (overcoming) death (Hermann-Pfandt 1990 [2001], 482 *et passim*). The three levels of interpretation of the female divine as Tārā – Prajñāpāramitā – Vajrayoginī (Ugra-Tāra in Sankhu, Nepal) appear also to be embodied in the Buddhist cult of the living goddess in Nepal (*kumārī*).

The cult of the female saviour, the goddess of compassion, invites a functional and theo/alological comparison to the nature and function of Guānyīn in Táng (唐) and post-Táng Chinese Buddhist traditions. As the result of specific socio-religious contexts the Indo-Himalayan traditions developed two gendered representations of enlightened compassion, while the mainstream Chinese traditions gradually transitioned Guānyīn from male to female.

### **Devī/Durgā - Tārā**

How, then, can we trace the origin of Tārā in early Medieval South Asia?

It is safe to link the development of Tārā as a Buddhist goddess to the increasing popularity of Devī/Durgā cults in early Medieval South Asia. Gosh (1980) has given ample evidence for the conceptual connection of Buddhist Tārā theology to Devī *bhakti* (devotion) (see also Shaw 2006, 312-313). . While Buddhist texts do not call Tārā a *śakti* (a manifestation of a male supreme god's power) by that very terminology, the earliest theo/alological interpretations of Tārā testify to this very concept, identifying her with the *karuṇā* of Avalokiteśvara, his *śakti* in terms of Medieval Hindu Devī theology – a point emphatically made by Gosh (1980, 18 *et passim*). Slusser (1982, 282), following Mallmann, calls Tārā 'the benign confederate or, alternatively, consort, of the beloved Avalokiteśvara', whose popularity in Nepal is well attested in the 8th century but might have already thrived in the Licchavi period (400-750 CE): lotus holding goddesses images of that period are not unambiguously identifiable as either Devī or Tārā ; in fact, Tārā's core iconography, her boon granting gesture (*varadamudrā*) and *utpala* (blue water-lily) inherits Devī's iconography - just as Avalokiteśvara adapts Vaiṣṇava and, in particular, Śaiva iconography. As Slusser puts it, unless marked by mirror/trident, the Great mother/Durgā/Devī 'cannot be distinguished from other lotus-bearing, boon-bestowing goddesses such as Lakṣmī or Tāra. ... But quintessentially, they themselves are corollary manifestations of Durgā. Thus, whoever they may be, as the Goddess they are also Devī' (Slusser 1982, 308-309).

Tārā's "cult is clearly part of a broader stream of Indic goddess worship and must be assessed in that light." (Shaw 1996, 313). As Gosh remarks, "it is abundantly clear that the chief inspiration for the Buddhist goddess Tārā was derived from the Brahmanical concept of Devī (or Durgā)." (Gosh 1980, 20). The rise of the Brahmanical pantheon during the Gupta period (4<sup>th</sup> c. to ca. 550 CE) appears to have led to massive adaptations of Brahmanical *Bildprogramme* (iconography as visual theology) to form a rivalry, imitative Mahāyāna pantheons in the aid of the counter-brahmanical propagation of Buddhism (cp. Gosh 1980, 15-16).

### **Avalokiteśvara's Compassion**

There is no firm evidence for the existence of Tārā in Buddhist thought or practice prior the 5<sup>th</sup> or even 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE (Gosh 1980, 10. 16. 23. 27; despite e.g. Conze [1951] trying to date Tārā's emergence to 150 CE see Hermann-Pfandt 1990 [2001], 64); yet by the 6<sup>th</sup> century her cult was established in Eastern India as iconographic evidence from, among other places, Nālaṃdā confirms.

Tārā appears the earliest in iconography as subsidiary goddess (or maybe 'hypostasis', see Snellgrove 2002, 151) to the right below Avalokiteśvara together in a triad with Bhṛkuṭī (left below), e.g. in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE Kānherī cave 90; Gosh 1980, 23). Her emergence is clearly a sign of the evolution of the popular Avalokiteśvara cult during the late Gupta.

Tārā's name suggests the meaning 'star' (as in 'guiding star', for sailors) and 'saviouress'; however, her early connection to Avalokiteśvara in conjunction with Bhṛkuṭī leads me to postulate a different original association: 'star/pupil (of the eye)'. Just as Bhṛkuṭī is the personification of Avalokiteśvara's brow (i.e. his analytical or 'frowning' observational gaze), Tārā represents his (compassionate, tearful) 'star of the eye.' I would like to corroborate this interpretation by pointing to one of the earliest textual sources for Tārā, the *Mañjuśrī-mūla-kalpa* (see below; 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE), where the goddess is called *devīmāryāvalokiteśvarakarūṇā* (p. 45 Vaidya), Avalokiteśvara's compassion (*karūṇā*) personified. The identification of Tārā as the female, active (*devī*) compassion of (archetypical, mahēśvar-ic) Avalokiteśvara is aetiologically explained in the narratives of

Tārā's birth from Avalokiteśvara's tear(s) as mentioned in Buddhaguhya's 這個頁面 8<sup>th</sup> c. commentary on the *Vairocana-abhisambodhi-tantra* 大毘盧遮那成佛神變加持經 (T. 848):

*Avalokiteśvara gazed upon realms of beings and he saw that even if he were to transfer all his accumulation of merit and awareness in order to benefit all countless beings and save them, he would still not be able to free them all from saṃsāra. Then from his tears which arose from the power of his great compassion, many Tārā goddesses emerged and took on the forms of saviours for all beings. Therefore she is called the Goddess Tārā (saviouress). Moreover, her many forms may be known from other Tantras. (Hodge 2003, 108)*

The aforementioned pre-9<sup>th</sup> c. CE *Praise of the Twenty-One Forms (Ārya-tārā-namaskāraikaviṃśati-stotra)* refers to her in verse 1c with the ambiguous term *vaktrābja* (tib. chu skyes zhal; 'face-water-born' i.e. tear-born or 'facial lotus ... ', see Willson 1996, 123-125). As Je Gendun Drupa Palzang po (rJe dGe 'dun grub pa dpal bzang po, 1391 -1475) explains, Avalokiteśvara

*saw that however many migrating beings He removed from samsara, they grew no fewer, and He wept. Tara sprang from the opening filaments of His face — of an utpala (blue lotus) that grew in the water of His tears. (Willson 1996, 125)*

### **Saviouress from the Eight Dangers**

Avalokiteśvara's pupil of the eye emitted Tārā, the 'eye-pupil/star' becoming the 'saviouress'. Tārā's genealogical connection to Avalokiteśvara is abundantly evident in her absorption of Avalokiteśvara's function as the saviour from danger(s), in particular from the Eight Great Dangers (*aṣṭa-mahābhaya* Tib. 'jigs pa chen po brgyad): lions, elephants, fire, snakes, robbery, 'violent water' (i.e. floods, drowning, shipwreck), prison, and *piśācas* (man-eating demons). In the Tibetan tradition, these Eight Great Dangers are interpreted according to their outer and inner meaning. For example Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, following the 19<sup>th</sup> c. polymath Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye ('jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899), equates lions with pride; elephants with ignorance; fire with anger; snakes with

jealousy; robbery with laziness; water with attachment; prison ('kings') with saṃsāric preoccupations, habits and neurotic dependencies; and *piśācas* (cannibals) with dharmic doubt (pp. 90-93).

Avalokiteśvara appears in the function of the redeemer from saṃsāric dangers prominently in the Lotus Sūtra (*saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*), ch. 25 [24], verse portion; he is depicted as dispeller of *aṣṭamahābhayas* in the Deccan before Tārā takes over this role in the 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE both in Western and Eastern Indian iconography . This might be connected with the spread of her cult through the writings of one of the goddesses' most devote propagator, Candragomin (7<sup>th</sup> c. CE): *Aṣṭamahābhaya-Tārā* is prominently invoked in his hymns (see Beyer 1988, 229-230; Willson 1996 232-237) and later praises (*stutis* and *stotras*) including works by Sarvajñamitra (early 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE, Willson 1996, 61-263). The *Sādhanamālā*, a medieval Indic collection of Tantric meditation texts from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> c. CE, includes a succinct poetic meditation on Aṣṭamahābhaya-Tārā (No. 99, pp. 207-209 Bhattacharyya), exemplifying the 'four axes of a visualization session: protective magic, philosophical discourse and reflection, devotion, and symbolic transformation of the self' (Gomez 1995, 219). On the highest tantric level, Vajravilāsinī (a specific form of Vajrayoginī/-vārāhī) assumes Aṣṭamahābhaya-Tārā's role (see English 2002, 85).

### **Transcending the gender binary: Princess Ye shes zla ba**

While Tārā's origin as the tear-sprung *karuṇā* of Avalokiteśvara provides a narrative form from the perspective of 'sambhogakāyic theology': the experience of meditational deities/Buddhas in the 'enjoyment body' (*sambhogakāya*) accessible in deep-absorption-states of mind: in the language of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (4-5<sup>th</sup> c. CE), a seminal text which laid the philosophical ground work for Buddhist tantric praxis, this meso-reality of 'pure illusion' mediates between experience of 'tainted illusion' (saṃsāra, in which Buddhas appear as emanation bodies, *nirmāṇa-kāya*) and the 'purity' of the ultimate reality experience (*dharmadhātu*, Buddhas as 'truth bodies', *dharmakāya*). On the karmic-saṃsāric (nirmāṇa-kāya) level Tārā is thought to have previously been the princess Yeshe Dawa (Ye shes zla ba) – 'moon of pristine wisdom' (\*Jñānacandrā?) during the time of the Buddha Dundubhisvara - as told by Tāranātha's *sgrol ma'i rgyud kyi byung khung gsal bar byed pa'i lo rgyus gser gyi phreng ba* ('The Origin of Tārā Tantra from the Golden Rosary', Tempelman

1981; Willson 1996, 33-36; 178-208). Accumulating countless merit, Ye shes zla ba realised the non-substantiality of sex/gender - due to the core Buddhist philosophical teaching of the ultimate absence of an essential, independent self/personhood- *pudgalanairātmya* (bdag med gang zag med):

'di na skyes pa med cing bu med med /  
bdag med gang zag med cing rnam rig med /  
pho mor btags pa 'di ya ma brla /  
'jig rten blo ngan rnam par 'grul par gyur /  
(Tāranātha, *sgrol ma'i rgyud kyi byung ... 6* = Templeman 1981, 90)

*Here there is no man, there is no woman,  
No self, no person, and no consciousness.  
Labelling 'male' or 'female' has no essence,  
But deceives the evil-minded world* (Wilson 1996, 34)

She consequently vowed:

skyes pa'i rten la byang chub 'dod pa ni mang gi / bud med kyi lus kyi 'gro ba'i don  
spyod pa ni 'ga' yang med do / de bas na 'khor ba ma stong kyi bar du bud med kyi  
gzugs kyi 'gro ba'i don bya'o (Tāranātha/Templeman *ibid.*)

*'There are many who desire Enlightenment in a man's body, but none who work for  
the benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. Therefore, until saṃsāra is  
empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman's body.'*  
(Willson *ibid.*)

This radical stance on sex/gender equality expressed in Tāranātha's account is consistent with the layer of Mahāyāna thought which translate 'soteriological inclusiveness' (Sponberg 1992, 8) of women on the Buddhist path into the advocacy of equal acceptance of female Bodhisattva- and Buddha-hood (Paul 1985, 169), most prominently represented by the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* and the *Śrīmālādeviśiṃhanāda-sūtra*. The theology of Tārā hence



incorporates a radical, emancipatory impulse. However, similar to the androcentric, patriarchal context, function and effect of Guānyīn's female embodiment in East Asia, this liberating impulse largely appears to have failed to translate into any concrete social emancipation of women: within patriarchy the (Jungian) archetypical female – mother, lover, muse and goddess of death – is apparently only to be revered and exalted as 'visionary, spiritual, transcendent, immanent, numinous form' and in the flesh only tolerated as 'instrumentalized, subordinated woman' ("*nur in visionärer, geistiger, jenseitiger, innerlicher, numinoser Gestalt ... oder aber als instrumentalisierte, untergeordnete Frau*" Hermann-Pfandt 1990 [2001], 481).

### **The Rise of Tārā in Tantra**

The picture that emerges is that between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, Tārā's cult gained significant popularity in Eastern India as well as in the Deccan - spreading out as far as Java and Tibet; in this period important tantric texts emerged, which proved formative to Tārā's theology: the probably 7<sup>th</sup> c. *Vairocana-abhisambodhi-tantra*, also referred to as Mahāvairocana sutra; the probably contemporary *Mañjusrī-mūla-kalpa* and, largely adapted from it, the *Tārā-mūla-kalpa* (see Landesman 2008).

In the *maṇḍala* layout of the *Vairocana-abhisambodhi-tantra* (chapter 2) Tārā (right) accompanies Avalokiteśvara, together with Bhṛkuṭī (left); this adds a textual testimony to the earlier iconographic sources. She is described as '*virtuous and removes fear, light green in colour ... She has the proportions of a young woman, in her clasped hands she also holds a blue lotus*' (II. 26, Hodge 2003, 108). In the *Secret Maṇḍala* Chapter (ch. 13), the entourage of Avalokiteśvara is described as Tārā, Bhṛkuṭī, Pāṇḍaravāsīnī and Yaśodharā (tib. longs spyod ma) (XIII. 72, Hodge 2003, 289; he translates her name as Vasumatī); all these goddesses subsequently represent or develop into different major forms of Tārā (green, red, white and yellow respectively) (see Landesman 2008, 52).

I have already briefly mentioned the theology of Tārā in the *Mañjusrī-mūla-kalpa*. In the prose section of its second chapter, the goddess appears in her standard form with *varadamudrā* and *utpala*, yet golden in colour. She is described as Avalokiteśvara's *karuṇā* (see above), seated on the lapis-lazuli summit of the right-hand mountain beneath him (Willson 1996, 41). Yet in the verse section, she is also called 'the mother of the illustrious Prince Mañjughoṣa (*kumārasyeha mātā devī mañjughoṣasya mahādyuteḥ*, verse 46, see

Gosh 1980, 12 and Landesman 2008, 51), which adds the level of Prajñāpāramitā (emptiness/wisdom, see below) to her theology - as the mother of enlightened wisdom (Mañjuṣa, Mañjuśrī) personified: here, she represents the beatitude (ultimate happiness) of/for all beings (*śreyasaḥ sarvabhūtānām* verse 45). However, on the saṃsāric level of *karuṇā* she is described as the *sarvaviḥnaghātakī devī uttamābhayanāśinī*, the goddess who eliminates all obstacles and ultimate vanquisher of fears (verse 44, p. 45 Vaidya), and as 'granting boons' (*varadā* verse 44, *varadāyikā* verse 45). Indeed, Tārā is explicitly called 'compassion in female embodiment' (*strīrūpadhāriṇī devī karuṇā*, verse 45ab). This point is elaborated in the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter, a later addition to the *Mañjusrī-mūla-kalpa* testifying to key sacred sites of Tārā in the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> c. as distant as Kalaśa (Kalasan, Java):

*strīrūpadhāriṇī bhūtvā devī viceruḥ sarvato jagataḥ |*  
*sattvānām hitakāmvārthaṃ karuṇārdreṇa cetasā || 823 (p. 507 Vaidya)*

The goddess in female embodiment roams the whole world |

Desiring to help beings with a heart warm-feeling with compassion || 823

The *Tārā-mūla-kalpa* describes Tārā as *mahāvidyā* (Tib. rig pa chen po) – *vidyā* being both the female counterpart to *mantra* and tantric consort / the enlightened awareness of a deity (Landesman 2008, 53-55).

### **Tārā as consort in the *Mahāyoga* and *Yoginī Tantra* traditions**

Mahāyoga Tantric theo/ology features Tārā as consort ('wisdom': *prajñā* or *vidyā*) of the dhyāni Buddha Amoghasiddhi as early as the pre-8<sup>th</sup> c. *Guhyasamāja Tantra*. Tārā's rise as Buddhist goddess of compassion is intrinsically linked to (proto-)Vajrayāna theology. At the beginning of Ch. 14 of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, the generation of the four quaternary goddesses is described, with Tārā being introduced thus:

atha bhagavān samantasamayasaṃbhavavajraṃ nāma samādhiṃ samāpadyemāṃ  
 samayasattvāgrabhāryāṃ svakāyavākcittvajrebhyo niścārayan /  
 Oṃ TĀRE TUTTARE TURE SVĀHĀ /

athāsyāṃ gītamātrāyāṃ sarvabuddhā mahātmajāḥ /  
harṣitā jñānam āpede vajrakāyam anusmaran // 7  
buddhavajramahāsainyaṃ sattvadhātuṃ samantataḥ /  
karoti dāsavat sarvaṃ niśceṣṭaṃ vaśakṛt kṣaṇāt // 8  
ity āha ca/ (p. 298 Freemantle)

*Then the Blessed One entered, the samādhi called "Birth of the Universal Samaya"  
and brought forth from his vajra body, speech and. mind, this great Queen of the  
samaya-being: OM etc.*

*7-8 As soon as this was said, all the Buddhas born of the Great One, rejoicing,  
attained, wisdom, and contemplated Vajra Body. Instantly she subjugates the great  
host of Buddhas and Vajras and the whole realm of sentient beings, making them all  
enslaved and motionless.*

*So said, the Blessed One. (p. 89 Freemantle).*

In chapter 17, v. 52 (p. 388 Freemantle) of the *Guhyasamāja*, Tārā is mentioned as one of the quaternary goddesses in the *vajradhātu-maṇḍala* (cf. the *Sarvadurgatiparśodhana Tantra* 73a Skorupski, p. 240). Here, she represents the wind element - among Locanā (earth), Māmākī (water), and Pāṇḍarā (fire; Vajradhara is said to represent the Space-consort himself):

*pr̥thivī locanā khyātā abdhātur māmākī smṛtā /  
\*tejas tu pāṇḍarā khyātā\* vāyus tārā prakīrtitā /  
khavajradhātusamayaḥ saiva vajradharaḥ smṛtaḥ //*

[\*..\* pāṇḍarākhyā bhavet tejo ms reading followed by Bhattacharyya]

Moving on to the slightly later *Yoginī Tantras*, we find in the *Laghusaṃvara* (Cakrasaṃvara-Tantra, ed. Pandey) the same identification. The text even quotes the above verse from the *Guhyasamāja* (a-d only; hypometrically in c: omitting the *tu*) in its chapter XXXI, 12 (the space consort is here identified as Cumbikā, LXX.13ab).

The same identification of the quaternal goddesses in slightly different terminology is also found in the Hevajra-tradition (see Kāṇha, *Yogaratnamāla* I. i. [1-4] ed. Snellgrove 1959, vol. ii, p. 104: *pṛthavī, jalam, vahni, māruta*).

### **Tārā - Prajñāpāramitā**

Indeed, by the 9<sup>th</sup> c. CE Tārā had become the archetypical Buddhist goddess, absorbing other female deities and Buddha forms and including them in her theology as expressions. In particular Tārā acquired the theology of Prajñāpāramitā (perfection of wisdom) personified as the Mother of the Buddhas in the tradition of the Aṣṭāśahasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra (*Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 verses*), XII 253-255: ultimately the perfection of wisdom is the realisation of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) which makes her 'the mother, the progenitrix of the Tathāgatas, Arhats and Saṃyaksambuddhas (Completely Fully Awakened Ones)':

*Eṣā hi mātā janayitrī tathāgatānām arhatāṃ samyaksambuddhānām*

(p. 254 Mitra; p. 125 Vaidya)

Tārā, as already pointed out, is conceptualised as the mother of enlightened wisdom personified - Mañjuṣa - in the *Mañjusrī-mūla-kalpa*; she soon assimilates the appellation 'mother of all Buddhas'. For instance, Anupamarakṣita (flourished around the middle of the 12th c. CE) in the *prooemium* to his [Śyāmā]-Tārā sādhana (*Sāadhanamālā* 98 vol. i p. 200 Bhattacharyya) calls Tārā the "great mother of the Jinās:" *mahatīṃ jananiṃ jinānām*.

### **Praising the Goddess**

The literary production of Sanskrit praises (*stutis* and *stotras*) to Tārā for ritual purposes – such as the abovementioned *Ārya-tārā-namaskāraikaviṃśati-stotra* - testify to her growing thea/ological relevance within tantric Indian Buddhism. *Stutis* form also an important part of the meditation texts (*sādhana*'s) devoted to Tārā and can refer to complex tantric thea/ological points. For example, the long Vajra-Tārā sādhana by Ratnākaraśānti (ca. 978-1030 CE) in the *Sāadhanamālā* (110) includes the following praise:

*dveṣavajri namas tubhyaṃ mohavajri namo 'stu te /*

*mātsaryavajri māṃ trāhi rāgavajri prayaccha me //*  
*mahāmātre maherṣyeti sarvavajri prasīda me /*  
*sarvavajrasamayanāthā sarvakarmaprasādhikā //*

Vajra-wielder against anger, hail to thee! Vajra-wielder against delusion – hail thee! /  
Vajra-wielder against jealousy, save me! Vajra-wielder against desire, bestow upon  
me (siddhis)!

There is great envy in utmost measure: Vajra-wielder against all and any, favour me!  
/ Protecting Lady of the whole vajra gathering (or: tantric vow), Lady who adjusts all  
karma!

This praise focusses on the power of Vajra-Tārā to smash (with a thunderbolt, *vajra*) by transforming with the diamond (*vajra*) all disturbing emotions; to bestow boons; to save and protect; and to balance negative karma and conditions. The praise invokes Tārā indeed in the tantric tradition of transformative visionary yoga of the *yoganiruttara Hevajra-Tantra* (ii.iii 51-52 Snelgrove ii p. 60). This *Yoginī* (Tib. yum, 'mother')-Tantra system connects the female appellations '-Diamond-(wielderess)' with the *āyatanas* (bases of perception in Buddhist scholasticism), in particular as the *yoginīs* (tantric female deity forms of yogic transformation) symbolise the ultimate purity (*śuddhi*) of impure faculties (*indriyāṇy avīśuddhāni*) or the six sense bases (ibid. 50 p. 58). In contrast, the fellow *yoganiruttara* Cakrasaṃvara tradition uses the deity appellations in the masculine forms referring to the dhyāni-Buddhas or five (six) heads of the Buddha families (*buddha-kula*) or their exoteric Bodhisattva expressions (*Abhidhānottara Tantra*, 4.4b2-3 and 84a3-4 Kalff; see also the Vajrayoginī sādhana called *Abhisamayamañjarī* [Flower Cluster of the Method of Realization] by Śākyarakṣita [Śubhākaragupta], English 2002, 116-17).

However, sādhanic praises equally refer to the exoteric face of Tārā theology. For instance, the standard *stuti* inserted to Tibetan Tārā sādhanas is comparably less dramatic and less clearly connected to esoteric tantric praxis. This conventional praise is the first verse of Atiśa's *Ārya-Tārā-stotra*, extant in Tibetan translation in the Tibetan bstan 'gyur (canon of Indian masters):

| |  
lha dang lha min cod pan gyis | | zhab kyi padma la btud de | |

phongs pa kun las sgrol mdzad cing || sgrol ma la ni phyag 'tshal lo ||

*The gods and demi-gods (asuras) bow the crowns of their heads to your lotus-feet  
Liberatrice from all adversities and Saviouress, to you we bow down!*

Still, Tibetan Tārā *sādhana*s include this verse with some variations, one of which I found theologically particularly notable: preserving or producing a *lectio difficilior*, several post-17<sup>th</sup> c. *sādhana*s read "sgrol ma yum la" ("to the consort Tārā") instead of "sgrol ma la ni" ("Saviouress (Tārā), to you") in 1d. Among those *sādhana*s are in the Sakya tradition the popular Green Tārā pūjā text *The Lamp which Illuminates the Practice of the Four Maṇḍala Ritual of Tārā* (*sGrol ma maṇḍala bzhi pa'i che ga bya tshul gsal ba'i sgro me*) by Kun dga' lhun grub (1654-1726), which reads "sgrol ma yum la phyag 'tshal lo" in 1d (1993 p. 11), "to the consort Tārā we bow down"; and the two most widely practiced Karma Kagyu White Tārā *sādhana*s – the *sgrol dkar rgyun khyer* (Daily practice of White Tārā) by Kun mkhyen Tā'i si bsTan pa'i nyin byed (the 8<sup>th</sup> Tai Situpa Tenpe Nyinje, 1700-1774) and the succeeding *sādhana rje btsun yid bzhin 'khor lo'i rgyan gyi rnal 'byor khyer bde 'chi med grab pa* (An Easy Daily Practice of the Noble Wish-Fulfilling Wheel, Accomplishing Deathlessness) by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, which read "sgrol ma yum la phyag 'tshal bstod" (Karthar 2009, 139 and 160-161), "to the consort Tārā we bow down in praise". With the *varia lectio* ('yum la' instead of 'la ni'), the *sādhana*s invoke and add an esoteric key function of Tārā as *yum* ('mother', consort) in higher tantric theology.

### **The many forms of the goddess**

The Indic Tārā *sādhana*'s still extant in collections such as the *Sādhanamālā* testify to the popularity of the goddess in a wide variety of forms (e.g. the *Sādhanamālā* enumerates 25 form, SM89-170: Khadirvaṇī-, Mahattarī-, Varada-, Vaśya-, Vajra-, Aṣṭamahābhaya-, Mahācīna-, Mṛtyuvañcana-, Sita-, Ṣaḍbhujāśukla-, Jaṅgulī-, Dhanadā-, Sragdharā-, Durgottāriṇi-, Viśvamātā, Prasanna-, Ārya-, Mahāśrī- Tārā, Viduyjvālākārālī, Ekajaṭā, Cundā, Māricī, Prajñāpāramitā, Sarasvatī and Bhṛkuṭī). Sūryagupta formed a tradition of twenty-one Tārās but also a set of 100 Tārās in a tradition attributed to Candragomin is referred to in Tibetan sources, e.g. in the *gcig shes kun 'grol* initiation cycle compiled by the 9<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, dBang phyug rdo rje (1559-1603). The manifold Tārās started to express female enlightened

qualities within all five Buddha families and within multiple *maṇḍala* reference frames. Accomplished female practitioners and teachers such as the famous gCod lineage holder Machig Labdron (ma gcig lab sgron) were seen as *nirmāṇa-kāyas* or emanations of Tārā (see Young 2004, 157-9). While some forms of Tārā popular in India – such as the yellow Vajra-Tārā connected to the *Vajrapaṅjarā-Tantra* - gradually became obscure in Tibet, two forms of Tārā started to eclipse all other forms, the (dark) Green Tārā (Śyāmā-) and White Tārā, the Wish-fulfilling Wheel (*cintāmaṇḍikakra* or *cittamaṇḍikakra*) whose rite is particularly practised in the Sakya and Kagyu schools, specifically for Long Life (cf. Karthar 2009).

## Conclusions

As Beyer's ([1973] 1988) foundational monograph indicates, the cult of Tārā is central to contemporary Tibetan Buddhism; a large number traditional followers of Tibetan Buddhism as well as virtually all monastics know by heart the famous *Praise of the Twenty-one forms of Tārā (Ārya-tārā-namaskāraikaviṃśati-stotra)*, reciting it twice, thrice and seven-times in daily liturgies (*pūjās*), often in breath-taking speed. Yet Tārā's continuing relevance is not restricted to the Tibetan inheritors of Indic Vajrayāna; her rites are also prominently present among the Sanskrit tradition of the Newars in Nepal, for instance as the principal deity in the *Saptavidhānuttarapūjā*, a frequently performed exoteric ritual within the framework of the Cakrasaṃvara system (see Bajracharya 2007).

The *Praise of the Twenty-one forms of Tārā* forms the basis of a Buddhist modernist adaptation of goddess worship: drawing firmly from the romantic transcendentalist heritage of modern Buddhism, the American Tārā dancers of the *tārādhātu* perform an eclectic danced version of the hymn understood and framed as a *sādhana* (meditation praxis, complete with refuge; seven-branch prayer; self-generation; praise and mantra; and completion and dedication). The dance is based on the creative visions of the practice' creator; she is a former Hindu temple dancer and the semi-improvised, individualised dance moves include elements from a variety of spiritual dance traditions, including West-African dance (*personal communication*). The praise is enacted by 21 women in orientalist/new age dresses who perform the 21 one aspects of Tārā individually in a danced *maṇḍala* framed by four guardians (who can be male). This neo-Buddhist practice is being encouraged and supported by Tibetan masters of the Karma Kagyu lineage (in particular Situ Rinpoche). Despite this link to traditional Tibetan Buddhist transmissions, the practice hardly resonates

with the existing Tibetan Lama dance meditative art form: although being embedded in universally altruistic framework of Indo-Tibetan (Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna) Buddhist meditation praxis, the Tārā dance manifest a rather eclectic modernist vehicle for individual spiritual journey and self-empowerment, using indiscriminately traditional Indo-Tibetan Buddhist *mudrās* in combination with a variety of sacred dance traditions and creative inventions. The dance is New-Age Buddhism as theology is practice.

In praise and meditation, as female enlightened compassion embodied and as the active compassion (*karuṇā*) of Avalokiteśvara, Tārā offers succour in all saṃsāric troubles; dispels outer and inner dangers; and finally points, as the mother and matrix of the Buddhas, to the ultimate experience of *śūnyatā* (emptiness); within esoteric tantric theology the goddess overlaps, merges with or appears as the inspirational female wisdom forms (*yoginīs, ḍākinīs*), instrumental for highest yoga practice. Identifying with the deity at this level pushes the heteropatriarchal, male practitioner beyond the edge of gender binarism and collapses gender dualities into non-dual awareness. On every level of the practitioner's weakening dualistic perception of conventional reality, Tārā provides the female access to 'metagendered' non-duality (see Scherer 2006).

This paper exemplifies how a feminist-emancipatory impulse within Christian Theology and Christian Studies can provide a fruitful inspiration for analogue impulses in Buddhist Critical-Constructive Thought (Dharmology) and Buddhist Studies. Taking Tārā-Theology seriously, this critical impulse can grow to become a successful example of Christian-Buddhist crosspollination and cross-fertilisation. *Buddhist-Christian Studies'* commitment to true interreligious dialogue and harmony-in-difference provides a welcome forum for - and calls for further examples of – such explorations of emancipatory inter- and cross-faith liberation theologies, in dire need both from a scholar's and a practitioner-activist's perspective. Faced with growing theological fundamentalisms within both Abrahamic and Dharmic religions, Buddhists and Christians can learn much from their respective approaches, successes, and struggles in Critical and Practical/Constructive Theology and Dharmology.



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