



Tara Devi - Perceptions and Visualisations

Stuti Suhani

*Received 25 June, 2023; Revised 03 July, 2023; Accepted 05 July, 2023 © The author(s) 2023.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org*

The worship of the female element took strong roots in Buddhism with the rise of the cult of *Tara Devi*, a Buddhist saviour goddess with a variety of forms. Derived from the root 'tar', Tara is the name of the goddess who makes others, i.e., the devotees, 'cross the sea or ocean'. This implies that she enables her devotees to surmount all sorts of dangers and calamities.¹

The earliest forms of Buddhism viewed women merely as impediments in the journey towards *nirvana*². However, towards the later part of Gautama Buddha's life, women were allowed to join the monastic order. Nevertheless, since the society as well as monasteries continued to be dominated by their male counterparts, women were rarely seen as spiritual guides.

As Buddhism expanded and won the allegiance of an increasing number of people, it also underwent some changes in its basic beliefs and practices, particularly manifesting in the emergence of the sect known as '*Mahayana*' (the Great Vehicle). The essential distinguishing feature of this sect was its new approach towards the concept of *Bodhisattva* which earlier represented Gautama

Buddha before he attained enlightenment. In Mahayana, it represented one who was able to attain

¹ Dubey, RK Dhar. *Worship of Mother Goddess in Buddhism*, in *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*,

volume V. 4 October, 2017.

² 'Nirvana' literally means 'blown out' and the analogy is most frequently applied by the Buddhists to explain it as the

blowing out of the flame of desire which leads to a liberation from worldly sufferings. In Buddhism, nirvana is defined as the extinction of the threefold fires: lust (raga), hatred (dosa), and ignorance (moha). (Nazari, Morad. *The Doctrine of Nirvana in Buddhism (a brief overview)*, n.d.)

salvation himself, yet transferred their merit to others to enable them to attain Nirvana³. It is the teaching about Bodhisattva which is the characteristic feature of Mahayana sect, also known as *Bodhisattvayana*⁴.

In Mahayanism, goddess worship began to acquire an important place. Thus emerged the subject of *Vajrayana* Buddhism (Diamond Vehicle/Thunderbolt Vehicle) which is often also recognised as *tantric* Buddhism. It placed a central importance on the worship of female divinities. Vajrayana stressed that truth resides within the body of a human irrespective of the gender of that body; yet, without the body of women, no tantric practice is considered to be complete and thus, female body is acknowledged as the abode and medium of realising the truth⁵.

Majority of the scholars agree upon the fact that Tara is the most well known and supremely established goddess of Vajrayana Buddhism. The word Tārā means "star" and "crossing," as a star crosses the night sky.⁶ By extension, the name Tārā signifies she who guides or carries others across (difficulty), who navigates others across (a water body), and she who protects, rescues, and liberates.

Her origin as a Buddhist divinity has been explained in a variety of canonical literature as well as through popular folklores. According to one of the Tibetan teachings, Tara was originally born as a princess named *Yeshe Dawa* (“Moon of Primordial Wisdom”) who vowed to achieve enlightenment for the welfare of all the people who suffered worldly existence. Since it was believed that only a

³ Sahu, B.P. and Kesavan Veluthat. *Society and Culture in Post Mauryan India C. 200 BC - AD 300*, 2016

⁴ Warde, A.K. *Indian Buddhism*, Motilal Banarsidass Publisher, New Delhi, 2000.

⁵ Kaur, Gurmeet . *Tara in Vajrayana Buddhism: A Critical Content Analysis in Feminist Theology*, 30 (2), 210-221, 2022.

⁶ Tārā is a feminine noun, derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *ṭṛ* meaning “to cross”; the English cognate is “traverse.”

male could become enlightened, she was advised to pray to be reincarnated as a male. Princess

Yeshe Dawa, however, vowed to attain enlightenment and to carry out all her enlightened activities in female form; eventually, this female bodhisattva became completely enlightened and was known as Tara.⁷

Narratives of Tara also describe her as the female counterpart of Bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara*. The common narrative is that she was born from a lotus that grew in Avalokitesvara’s tears of pity which were shed upon his realisation that the world was deep in suffering even after he worked for eons to liberate all beings. The earliest identifiable images of Tara, dating from the sixth century, typically show her as a member of a triad- Avalokitesvara in the centre, with Tara on his right and Goddess *Bhrikuti*⁸ on his left; it is important to note that Tara is often hailed as the Compassion of Avalokitesvara and since compassion is Avalokitesvara’s principal attribute, Tara was by far the more important of the two goddesses.⁹

Whether we think of Tara as a female counterpart of a great bodhisattva , a legendary princess , or whether we think of her as an emanation of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, in the essence of it, the principle of Tara is fearlessness and courage.¹⁰

⁷ Rinponche, K.P. Sherab and K.T Dongyal Rinpoche. *Tara’s Enlightened Activity: An Oral Commentary on the Twenty-one Praises to Tara*, Snow Lion Publications, USA, 2007.

⁸Goddess Bhrikuti is closely associated with Goddess Tara, variously deemed to be her sister, incarnation, or even a replacement of one of her forms (Green/Yellow Tara). Some stories suggest that she was also born out of Avilokitesvara’s tear and while Tara represents his compassion, Bhrikuti represents wisdom. Other narratives suggest that she was born as a Nepali princess and was married to the earliest Tibetan emperor.

⁹ Wilson, Martin. *In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress (Source texts from India and Tibet on Buddhism’s Great*

Goddess), Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1986.

¹⁰ Zangmo, Lama and Kagyu Samye Ling. *Benefits of Green Tara Practice*, n.d., 2004.

In spite of the Tārā’s obscure beginnings in Indian sources, her cult grew strong by the seventh century. Thereafter, it spread to Tibet where Tara was proclaimed the “Mother” of the Tibetan people.

Stephan Beyer’s work examines the living traditions of the cult of the Goddess in context of Tibet. He states that, this goddess, though everyone knows that her cult was imported from India, is related by myth to the very beginning of things in Tibet. One of the early pre-Buddhist myths relating the origins of the Tibetan people holds that "a devil and an ogress held sway, and the country was called Land of the Two Divine Ogres and as a result, red- faced flesh-eating creatures were born.". These offsprings were gradually given the crafts of culture

by successive generations of culture-hero kings, and they became the civilised Tibetans. Other versions of the myth say that the Tibetans were originally the simian descendants of a union between a rock ogress and a monkey. This latter account was eventually adopted as the official Buddhist version, and the monkey became identified first as a disciple and then as an incarnation of Avalokitesvara. But, surprisingly enough, the fierce ogress became identified as an incarnation of Tara.¹¹

Tara is thus widely perceived a Mother Goddess, evident in her titles like ‘Mother of Samsara and Nirvana’¹² and ‘Mother of all Buddhas’. In an extension of this comes up the goddesses’ most popular perception: that of a Saviouress. She is credited with releasing innumerable beings from worldly suffering.

¹¹Beyer, Stephan. *Magic and Ritual In Tibet: The Cult of Tara*, Motilal Banarsidass Publications, New Delhi, 1996.

¹² Tara is one of the main deities who deals with confused and distracted beings. Thus, Tara is named as the mother of

samsara and nirvana as her nature is ultimately non dual and her emanations are confined by no boundaries. (Rinponche, K.P. Sherab and K.T Dongyal Rinpoche. *Tara’s Enlightened Activity: An Oral Commentary on the Twenty-one Praises to Tara*, Snow Lion Publications, USA, 2007.)

However , according to Martin Willson, in medieval India, only a tiny fraction of the people were really serious about seeking liberation from samsara. The amazing popularity of Tara's cult was due to the worldly benefits She offered-above all, She was famous for saving from the eight great fears (or dangers), most often listed as lions, elephants, fire, snakes, robbers, imprisonment, water and the man-eating demons called pishachas.

She appealed especially to the merchants, who in their travels were often exposed to these dangers. Willson notes that the carvings on caves of Ajanta-Ellora depict Goddess Tara’s evolution into this function. The earliest depictions dated around the sixth century indicate that only Avalokitesvara could provide protection from the eight fears¹³ In the seventh century, however, Tara takes over the role, saving from the eight great fears on Her own, and rapidly becomes famous in it; in fact, most of the songs to Tara mention Her as Saviouress from the Eight Great Fears. ¹⁴ Apart from this, She is also closely associated with nature, her chief symbol being a blue lotus flower.

As She is capable of controlling other worldly elements such as demons, Tara is also perceived, in a narrow sense, as the Goddess of the Underworld. Closely related to a number of Tantric practices, many stories describe Her as subduing demons, dangerous beasts and malicious humans, all while dominating them without the use of violence. The Buddhists also knew Tara as a serpent-goddess under the name of Janguli.¹⁵

¹³ These depictions do show Goddess Tara and Goddess Bhrikuti accompanying him.

¹⁴Wilson, Martin. *In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress (Source texts from India and Tibet on Buddhism’s Great Goddess*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1986.

¹⁵ Dubey, RK Dhar. *Worship of Mother Goddess in Buddhism*, in *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*,

volume V. 4 October, 2017.

It is important to note that while Goddess Tara is one of the most important deities of Vajrayana Buddhism, she still is unique from other female divinities of this particular branch of the religion. Even in Tantra, most of the female deities are almost anonymous consorts of the male deities and in this sense, Tara's independence is unusual.¹⁶

One should also look into the fact that Goddess Tara has a variety of manifestations which are associated with varied attributes. The earliest forms of Tara have been described in the story of her origin. According the story of her origin from a lotus in Avilokitesvara’s tears goes, it is said that from his two tears appeared the White Tara and the Green Tara¹⁷. The former is seen as a peaceful goddess seated on a white lotus, having one face and six

arms. A different form of White Tara is depicted with three faces and twelve arms holding objects like a garland, a pot filled with treasure, book, and so on. She is called upon for calming and cure of ailments.

Green Tara is often called upon by the name of '*Khadiravani Tara*' (Tara of the fragrant forest).

This is one of her most popular forms, hailed upon as a peaceful deity who helps people in dire situations. However, she may also take up more fierce forms for driving away enemies. Green Taras also recognised as the consort of Amoghasiddhi.¹⁸

The White and Green Taras, with their contrasting symbols of the full blown and the closed lotus, are said to symbolise the unending compassion of the deity. Under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism the different forms of Tara multiplied to a traditional 108. Tibetan tradition often depicts

¹⁶Wilson, Martin. *In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress (Source texts from India and Tibet on Buddhism's Great Goddess)*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1986.

¹⁷ Often associated with Goddess Bhrikuti, another Buddhist divinity discussed earlier.

¹⁸ Also depicted in green colour, Amoghasiddhi is an important Bodhisattva in the Vajrayana tradition, often seen as the

male counterpart of Tara. His important attributes include wisdom and according to some scholars his green colour (a mixture of multiple hues) represents that he has been accomplished in a variety of activities.

the images of 21 different Taras coloured white, red, yellow, and so on, around a central Green Tara.¹⁹

The eight armed Red Tara is depicted as being seated on a golden coloured lotus. Her rite is for turning back the power of others. Another appearance of Red Tara is in the form of the granter of boons, hailed as *Varada-Tara*. She is often worshiped during the event of a consecration. The Red form of Tara is sometimes also described with one three-eyed face and two arms, one of which holds a trident. Called upon as the destroyer of enemies, her worship is seen as increasing the scope of one's mind.

The golden coloured form of Goddess Tara is seen with one face and ten arms. She holds a rosary bead near her chest; other objects held by her include a silk scarf, lotus, bell, etc. She is called upon in prayers or hymns for prolongation of one's life. Another manifestation of Golden Tara, often referred in hymns as '*ushnisha-vijay-Tara*' is described as being seated on a yellow lotus, having one face and four arms, and She is prayed to for neutralisation of poison. Another form of Golden Tara with one face and eight arms is perceived as the harbinger of prosperity and her rites are performed through fire offerings. The yellow form of Tara is shown with one face and two arms, the right one in downwards *abhaya mudra*²⁰ and the left one holding a golden lotus. She performs the act of subjugation of the evil.

In her ferocious blue form, also known as *Ugra Tara*, she is invoked to destroy enemies. This two armed form of Tara holds a trident in her right hand. *Ugra Tara* is also widely worshiped in the Hindu Tantric traditions in which She is visualised in a white lotus in the water covering the universe at the time of Great Dissolution (*maha pralaya*). This form of Tara was popular in the

¹⁹ Dogra, Uday. *Saraswati- The River and the Goddess in Indo Nordic Author's Collective*, n.d.

²⁰ This posture of the hand is symbolic of giving blessings or providing refuge.

Punjab Hills, as appears from Pahadi paintings in which she is often included in the group of goddesses called *Mahavidyas*.²¹ Icons of the deity have also been found in West Bengal, Assam, Andhra Pradesh (Amaravati caves), and in Nepal as well as Tibet.

Black Tara appears with her mouth wide open in a fierce expression. Like all the wrathful emanations, she sits on a fiery sun disc, which rests in the center of her lotus throne. The sun disc replaces the usual soothing moon disc. She holds a black vase, which contains the power to overcome even the most destructive and negative powers. In this aspect, Tara is known as the Destroyer of All Negativities.²² Black Tara is one-faced and four-armed, the hair of Her head bristling upwards, adorned with snakes, and She is called the Tara Crushing Adversaries.²³

It is important to note that both Buddhist and Hindu religious literature, particularly Tantric, have retained a vast and vivid literature on the Goddess Tara, and hence there arises a controversy of whether the goddess has her origin in Buddhism or Hinduism.²⁴ While some scholars like

Hirananda Shastri strongly argue in favour of Buddhist origin, others like M.K. Dhavalikar locate her origins in Hindu Tantrik literature and the Puranas.

To conclude, Goddess Tara is seen as a deity who protects mortals and guides them towards

enlightenment. Her cult saw popularity in a vast region across Southeast Asia including countries like Tibet, Nepal, and India. While the earliest traces of her worship are found in western India, the Goddess enjoyed more popularity in areas where Buddhism succeeded in retaining itself like Tibet.

²¹Buhemann, Gudrun. *The Goddess Mahacinakrama-Tara (Ugra-Tara) In Buddhist And Hindu Tantrism* in *Bulletin of The School of Oriental and African Studies*, Volume 59, 1996.

²²Wooten, Rachel. *Black Tara Who Destroys All Negativities*, n.d., 2020.

²³Wilson, Martin. *In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress (Source texts from India and Tibet on Buddhism's Great Goddess)*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1986.

²⁴Regmi, Jagdish Chandra. *Goddess Tara: A Short Study*, n.d.

Although this paper attempts to discuss Goddess Tara's various forms and manifestations, the understanding of her true nature is beyond intellectual constructs.