

Tara: Her Origins and Development

By Dharmachari Purna

[original pagination 125]

Namas Tāre ture vīre

OVER MY YEARS OF MEDITATION on the goddess-Bodhisattva Tārā, she has provided me with Refuge and, guiding star that she is, given me a direction by which to steer. I write this in the hope that others may also learn something of her friendly light.

As with any Buddhist meditation figure, an exploration of Tārā's origins and development must take into account her multi-faceted nature. It also needs to acknowledge her capacity to function on many different levels and appear in many different forms, according to the needs and level of understanding of the devotee. The desirability of understanding Tārā on different levels is further embodied in her *mantra*, *Om Tāre Tuttāre Ture Svāhā*, the sequence of syllables that encapsulates her essence. A traditional explanation of the *mantra* is that its variant uses of her name represent three progressive stages of deliverance or salvation. *Tāre* represents deliverance from mundane suffering; *tuttāre* represents deliverance into the spiritual path conceived in terms of individual salvation; and *ture* represents the culmination of the spiritual path in terms of deliverance into the altruistic path of universal salvation – the Bodhisattva path.¹ Approaching questions such as 'Who is Tārā?' and 'What are her origins, and how did she develop?' we need to be aware of an interweaving not only of different mythical and historical strands but also of [126] her ability to function on completely different levels: as a protective goddess, as a Bodhisattva, and as a Buddha. As part of our exploration of this fascinating figure and how she may have developed, we will examine first the significance of her name and personal symbols before looking at her beginnings, both mythical and historical. The development will include an examination of the influences on her of the cults of the stellar goddess and the goddess of forest and wind. We will conclude with an attempt to understand the significance of Tārā's vow to work for the benefit of sentient beings in the form of a woman. It may be that Tārā's emergence and widespread popularity need to be seen in the context of a shift in emphasis in later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna practice towards an ideal of non-dualistic androgyny and a re-valorisation of those qualities more associated with the 'feminine'.

TĀRĀ'S NAME AND SYMBOLS

The name 'Tārā' itself tells us much about her. Pāli and Sanskrit dictionaries generally define the word *tārā* as 'star' or 'planet' and it may be etymologically related to the English word 'star'. According to the Pali Text Society Dictionary, it is equivalent to the Latin *astrum*.² In all Sanskrit-based modern Indian languages *tārā* is still the word for 'star'. A derivative of the same word means 'the pupil of the eye', suggesting the idea of a focal point, which further gives us the idea of Tārā being in some manner a very concentrated essence. However, the more popular approach in Buddhism is to interpret Tārā's name as coming from the causative form of the verb *tr* 'to cross', 'to traverse' or 'to escape'. So we reach the idea of 'she who ferries across', 'she who saves' or 'a saviouress'. Tārā herself is supposed to have sung at one time:

When only my names are recollected, I always protect all beings,
I, O Saviour, shall ferry them across the great flood of their manifold fears.
Therefore the great Seers sing of me in the world under the name of Tārā.³

The translation of Tārā's name into Tibetan is Dölma (*sgrol-ma*) or 'she who saves'. [127]

Aside from her female form, Tārā's most common identifying symbols, throughout variations of her form or iconography, are the *utpala* (blue lotus) and the *vara* and *vitarka mudrās*. Sītātārā (White Tārā) with her *white* lotus is an exception to this, though interestingly the four-armed version is usually described as carrying an *utpala*. The *utpala* opens at sunset, blooms and releases its fragrance with the appearance of the moon, with which it is associated, just as the *padma*, the day lotus, is associated with the sun. Because of its prolonged life it is also taken as a symbol of longevity. Along with the red lotus of Avalokiteśvara, the blue lotus of Tārā promises relief from suffering by day and by night. Tārā's supple right hand is outstretched in boundless giving – the *vara* or *varada mudrā*. Her left hand is in *vitarka mudrā* (not the *abhaya mudrā* as is sometimes thought, though Tārā's *mudrā* may have developed from the *abhaya mudrā* of Durgā). All the fingers extend upward, except the ring finger which bends to touch the tip of the thumb. *Vitarka* is usually translated as 'reflection' or 'initial application',⁴ and this gesture of Tārā's is sometimes described – not helpfully – as 'argument'.⁵ It is also sometimes called the Three Jewels *mudrā*, or the *mudrā* of Giving Refuge, in my opinion a more apt description.⁶

MYTHICAL BEGINNINGS

In every age since beginningless time, it is said, out of compassion for the world, Tārā has appeared to help living beings attain Enlightenment. In our age, so the ancient stories say, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Regarder of the Cries of the World, looked down in compassion on the pain of humanity. He saw suffering everywhere. He saw beings born in suffering, dying in suffering, afflicted by diseases, wars and famines. He saw beings not obtaining what they desired and he saw beings obtaining what they did not desire. He also saw that however many beings he helped to escape from the fruitless round of mundane existence, the overall number grew no smaller – and for this he wept. The tears streamed down his face and formed a great pond. From the depths of its water sprang a blue lotus and on the lotus appeared the shimmering form of a beautiful sixteen year old woman. Her body was diaphanous and its translucent green seemed to hover between Reality and non-reality, quivering with an energy that could be seen, heard and felt. She was [128] clad in the silks and jewels of a princess and her hands, expressing boundless giving and refuge, held deep blue lotuses. Born of Avalokiteśvara's tears of compassion, she was herself the quintessence of compassion. She who is bright, she of the beautiful eyes, Tārā, joy of starlight, had once again appeared in this world.⁷ In another age, Tārā was born from a blue ray that shone from the eye of Amitabha.⁸

Her mythical beginnings go back to the prediction of her full Enlightenment made at the time of the Buddha Dundubhiśvara (or Amoghasiddhi as he is better known). This was 'in an age before which there was nothing else'.⁹ Then she was known as Jñāna-candrā or Moon of Wisdom, and contrary to the advice given her that she must pray to be reborn as a man in order to further her spiritual development, she made the vow to continue saving sentient beings in the form of a woman. She became so good at saving beings that Amoghasiddhi gave her the name of Tārā, the name by which she has been loved and recognised ever since.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Many of the principal features and attributes of Tārā seem to have developed from the early Brāhmanical figure of Durgā or Devī (the names are used synonymously and often together), paralleling similar links between Avalokiteśvara and early forms of Śiva. This early Brāhmanical Durgā is to be distinguished from the blood-thirsty warrior-goddess into whom she later developed

in the context of modern Hinduism. It seems that there is no literary or archaeological evidence for the existence of Tārā as an independent Buddhist deity before the Gupta period in India, the earliest images being dated around the sixth century CE.¹⁰ Early Durgā-like figures (such as Aditi and Rātri) are mentioned in Vedic literature, but the principle coalescence of all the early female Brāhmanical deities had it seemed emerged with the *Devī-māhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa* (late fourth century CE).¹¹ Etymologically both Tārā and Durgā convey the same idea, and their alternative names tend to emphasise this interrelationship. One of the forms of Tārā is Durgottārīṇītārā.¹² A *stuti* to Durgā in the *Mahābhārata* (probably fifth century CE) calls her Tārīṇī (She who Ferries Across, a common name for Tārā).¹³ In the *108 Names of the Holy Tārā*, at least forty-four are names [129] given to Durgā as well.¹⁴ The *Mahābhārata* explains Durgā's name: 'People call you Durgā, as you rescue people from difficult passage (durga)'.¹⁵ Durgā or Devī, as the consort of Śiva, is typically shown with four arms, carrying a noose and an elephant-goad, the remaining two hands displaying the *vara-mudrā* and the *abhaya-mudrā*. Early images of Durgā are often difficult to tell from early forms of Tārā. Particularly notable are a figure of Pārvatī in the Sūrya temple of Bargaon near Nālandā and a Durgā-Devī in Sujatā's temple across the river from Bodh Gaya. The Indian Museum in Calcutta also has a striking Tārā-like image of Māheṣvarī (the consort of Māheṣvara, a form of Śiva).

EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT

Though her emergence as an independent figure may be traced back to the fifth century CE, it seems that the image of Tārā as we now know her had only fully evolved by the sixth century – probably at Nālandā in Eastern India, from where it spread to the Deccan caves, most notably Ajanta and Ellora.¹⁶ Her popularity and importance increased, and within a couple of hundred years her 'cult' had spread not only throughout India, but also to Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, Indonesia, a little in China and Japan, and apparently even in Sri Lanka (the British Museum has a 12th-century Tārā image found near Trincomalee). She remained popular in India until the Moslem invasions of the late 12th century, and she has remained very popular in both Tibet and Mongolia. Stephan Beyer goes so far as to say that 'the worship of the goddess Tārā is one of the most widespread of Tibetan cults ... the Tibetans find with this goddess a personal and enduring relationship unmatched by any other single deity'.¹⁷ Though Tārā was previously known in Tibet, the arrival there of the great Atīṣa in 1042 established her popularity on a footing that grew from strength to strength over the following centuries. She was never more than a minor figure in China and Japan, her function being largely fulfilled by the very popular figure of Kuan Yin or Kannon. According to Blofeld the genesis of the female representation of Kuan Yin is heavily influenced by Tārā, even though Kuan Yin's primary link is with Avalokiteṣvara.¹⁸

An interesting insight into the development of Tārā is provided by the *mahābhayas*, a standardised list of eight 'Great Fears'. In the late fourth [130] century *Devī-māhātmya*, Devī (Durgā) is represented as liberating beings from all kinds of troubles including the *mahābhayas*, and even helping them to cross the ocean of existence (*bhavasāgara*, a term also used in connection with Tārā).¹⁹ By the fifth century images at Ajanta were showing Avalokiteṣvara liberating human beings from these Fears and a seventh-century cave at Ellora has Tārā doing likewise. This increasingly became the exclusive domain of Tārā; it was she above all others that would save beings from these Fears and would do so with lightening swiftness. The eight Great Fears are lions, elephants, fire, snakes, robbers, imprisonment, shipwreck or drowning, and the people-eating demons called *piṣācas*. These, to us slightly idiosyncratic, dangers would particularly have been encountered by ancient travellers journeying through various countries, towns, forests, deserted

places and over water. In ancient India, apart from monks and pilgrims, the community that increasingly became concerned with such long-distance voyaging was that of the merchants and traders, and it is through such people that the popularity of Tārā spread.

Her popularity in both India and Tibet may well have derived as much from the worldly benefits she offered as from the possibility of deliverance from conditioned existence. As just mentioned she appealed especially to travellers who, if we are to believe the numerous stories preserved for us, were frequently miraculously saved from the Great Fears by simply calling on her name.²⁰ Tales of this kind seem to have become particularly popular in Tibet. This is rather strange, for lions are not found there. If we looked at Tibetan artists' renderings of a lion we would probably get the impression that the artist had never seen a lion, nor even a life-like picture of one. Lions appear to be virtually mythological in Tibet. Elephants must be extremely rare in Tibet as well. Rescues from water usually concern shipwrecks in great oceans, which again most Tibetans will never have seen. Also we might well ask: What are those strange *piṣācas*? What do these situations symbolise? Why are these Fears so popular in Tibetan art despite the apparent incongruence? We can perhaps find some clue in the artists' renderings, at least for the *piṣācas*. They are always to my knowledge shown attacking a monk. The monk (at his best) could be regarded as representing the full-time seeker after Truth. All the other Great Fears strike both monks and lay people, but especially lay people. The *piṣāca* stories usually involve a monk or group of monks being attacked by a *piṣāca* demon, who leaps out 'black, ugly and baring its fangs', and grabs a monk 'by the head'.²¹ The first Dalai Lama Gedün-dr'up makes it all quite clear in a praise of Tārā:

They wander in space of darkest ignorance,
Sorely tormenting those who strive for Truth,
Of lethal danger to Liberation, the Fell
Demons of Doubt – please save us from this fear!²²

Whether it is The Lion of Pride, Delusion's Elephant, The Fire of Anger, The Snake of Envy, The Thieves of Wrong Views, The Chain of Avarice, Attachment's Flood, or the Fell Demons of Doubt, clearly the eight Great Fears can be understood as symbolising spiritual dangers and obstacles to growth.

As Tārā's importance grew her cult began to absorb various ethnic and religious figures, eventually embracing almost all the goddesses venerated in the Indian subcontinent, so that although they were initially thought of as independent, eventually they all came to be regarded as manifestations of Tārā. Outside the Indian subcontinent, various uses of the name 'Tara' certainly occur. There have been claims of Buddhist links with ancient Ireland, principally through the Budh's hills in Tyrone and Mayo and particularly with the sacred Tara Hill in Meath, the 'centre of Druidical song and power, the seat of ancient royalty'.²³ 'Tara' is now an Irish female name. There have also been claims of links with the Gaulish *Taranis* (Jupiter) and the Etruscan *Taran*. Apparently ancient Athens celebrated the festival of Taramata (Mother Tara).²⁴ However, many of these links seem tenuous and may have nothing in common with the Indian figure of Tārā, other than the similarity of name. *Taranis*, for instance, was literally the 'Thunderer' and mention of him by the Roman writer Lucan as early as the first century CE makes it fairly clear that the name pre-dates that of Tārā. The two figures appear to share nothing in terms of etymology or attribute of character.²⁵ However I was very interested to find in a book by Laurens Van Der Post that the name of one of his Southern African characters, Nuin Tara, meant 'Daughter of a Star'.²⁶ [132]

Tārā became the goddess par excellence, enveloping aspects of many other goddesses, and as such she became trusted not only to provide mundane protection, but also to enlighten human

beings. Depending on how she was regarded, she fulfilled exoteric and esoteric functions, providing for both reinforcement of the group and for self-transcendence. Initially regarded as the *prajñā* or wisdom aspect of Amoghasiddhi, she was progressively elevated to become a *vibhūti* or manifestation of the power of the *tathagātas* or Buddhas, then a Buddha in her own right and eventually even the 'Mother of the Buddhas'. A Tibetan song of praise to Tārā begins:

Well-born of the holy Actions of all universal
Conquerors! Supreme Refuge of all the three
Realms' Beings! Venerable Treasure of Compassion –
I bow at Your lotus feet, Tārā, Mother of Conqu'rors.²⁷

As Mother of the Conquerors (*Jinānamātā*) Tārā is sometimes equated with the *Prajñāpāramitā*.²⁸ An Indian commentary on verses to Tārā says that Tārā has the *mudrā* of Giving Refuge because she is the ultimate Refuge, combining all the Three Jewels. Her mind is Buddha, her speech Dharma, and her body Sangha.²⁹

Tārā is in fact the name of a whole class of deities. She appears in all the five colours of the Jinas. There are at least ten green forms, seven white, five yellow, two blue and one red. As Sarvajñamitra says of her form: 'It is a universal form, varied like crystal, since it changes according to circumstance'.³⁰ She has both peaceful and wrathful forms. Her figure is shown in virtually all postures from standing to sitting, full lotus, half lotus, one leg down, and both legs down. There is apparently also a reclining Tārā.³¹ She has two-armed forms, four arms, eight arms, twelve arms, and Getty even mentions a Tibetan painting showing a standing Tārā with 'one thousand heads and arms'.³² Ghosh lists seventy-six distinct forms of Tārā, and tradition tells us there are one hundred and eight names for her.³³

With the struggle for dominance between Brāhmanism (and its later development as Hinduism) and Buddhism, it was probably inevitable that there would be attempts to absorb back into Hinduism some of the popular influence of Tārā. According to what seems to be a rather late development in [133] Tantric Hinduism, Tārā is one of the Ten Great Wisdom aspects (*Daṣa-Mahāvidyās*) of the goddess Kālī.³⁴ As such Tārā has little significance in popular Hinduism being merely one of the many forms of Kālī. In contrast to the benign, compassionate Buddhist Tārā, the Hindu Mahāvidyā Tārā developed into a wrathful, sacrifice-demanding figure which seems to have been 'modelled on Tārā's fierce forms such as Kurukullā and Mahācinatārā'.³⁵ The absorption of Tārā as an aspect of Kālī may be a tendency similar to that which led to Hindu claims that the Buddha was an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. It can be seen both as an attempt to absorb some of her popular influence and to relegate it to a subordinate role.

TĀRĀ AS STELLAR GODDESS

The Music of the stars is mine, and the melody o'the moon.
Oh do you not hear them singing to you in the silence of the night?³⁶

In keeping with a deity that has absorbed various ethnic and religious figures progressively as her popularity spread, Tārā as goddess weaves a complex tapestry. We may follow many threads and find many stories woven into that fabric. Particularly strong are those of Tārā as goddess of navigation and Green Tārā as a forest goddess, and these we shall explore in a little more detail. But mention might also be made of others, such as the influences of the goddess of culture and the moon goddess on the figure of White Tārā.

In both ancient and modern times, without a knowledge of the stars and their movements it has not really been possible to find one's way over great distances. This is particularly so for the mariner, or the traveller through desert or jungle, where there are no landmarks. Probably the navigator's two most significant 'stars' were Venus and the Pole Star. In virtually all Indo-European cultures dependent on long distance travel a principle divinity was identified with the planet Venus. With the exceptions of the Semitic god Athtar and the Indian-Vedic Śukra or Bhṛgu, virtually all these deifications of the planet Venus were female figures, often combining associations with both the moon and fertility. Astarte as the planet Venus (and also a sea and Moon goddess) was worshipped in ancient Phoenicia and from there her worship spread through the islands and coastlines of the Mediterranean. We find variants on the same theme in Anat in Chaldaea, Syria and Egypt, in the (initially Assyrian) figure of Ishtar (later the chief goddess of Babylonia and the whole Mesopotamian region), in the Egyptian Isis and later in the Greek Aphrodite and the Roman Venus.³⁷ Athtar, Ishtar and Anat were also closely associated with the lion – which was considered the mount of Durgā, Pārvatī and the form of Tārā known as Simhanāda-Tārā.

In India there is a rather curious Brāhmanical legend of Tārā in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. Tārā in this story was the wife of Brhaspati (the planet Jupiter) and one day she was abducted by Soma (the Moon). Despite the efforts of Brhaspati to recover her and even Brahmā's command that she be returned, Soma refused to relinquish her. A mighty battle for the recovery of Tārā then followed and this battle was so fierce that 'the Earth, shaken to its very centre, cried out for protection'.³⁸ Tārā was eventually restored to her husband and later gave birth to Budha (the planet Mercury), who turns out to be the child of Soma. Very similar tales are told of Venus, Ishtar and Isis, which Velikovsky links to a series of cosmic disturbances involving our planet in the second millennium BCE and again in the 8th century BCE.³⁹

More particularly in India, it seems that certain key stars, particularly *Dhruva-tārā*, the Pole Star or North Star, acted as indispensable guides to navigation for both voyagers over the sea and travellers through the huge wildernesses that once covered the Indian subcontinent. In the *108 Names of the Holy Tārā*, Tārā is not only 'Leader of the caravans ... who showeth the way to those who have lost it'⁴⁰ but one of her one hundred and eight names in the original Sanskrit is Dhruvā,⁴¹ a name probably borrowed like many of her others from the Brāhmanical figure of Durgā. The stars provided both orientation and an assurance of safe passage. However Tārā not only gave guidance across mundane seas and led travellers or pilgrims safely through the pathless ways, such was her power that she could ferry the spiritual seeker across the ocean of existence (*bhavasāgara*) and show the way out of the dangerous jungles of conditioned existence towards Enlightenment itself.

TĀRĀ AS FOREST AND WIND GODDESS

Another thread that can be followed is that of Tārā as forest goddess. As with Amoghasiddhi, the Green form of Tārā is particularly associated with the [135] earth, plant life and the wind. In one story of her saving a wood-gatherer from the jaws of a lion Tārā appears as a woman clad in leaves.⁴² The form of Tārā known as Khadiravaṇī Tārā often wears lotus flowers in her hair instead of a jewelled diadem. Whether set on Mount Potala or the forest grove of Khadiravaṇī, her pure land seems rather a wild place, in contrast to the rather precise and flat landscape of Sukhāvātī. Mount Potala is described as being:

Covered with manifold trees and creepers, resounding with the sound of many birds,
And with murmur of waterfalls, thronged with wild beasts of many kinds;
Many species of flowers grow everywhere.⁴³

In another story associating her with the wind, a warrior awakes to find himself surrounded by a thousand enemy soldiers. He calls on Tārā and ‘at the same instant at which he called her name the Noble Lady herself appeared before him, arriving from the skies. From underneath her feet whirlwinds carried the soldiers off into the ten directions’, enabling the man to reach safety.⁴⁴ An early Tantric work, the *Guhyasamāja*, links Tārā closely with the element air (*vāyu*)⁴⁵ and in the visualisation of the *stūpa* as practised in the Western Buddhist Order, the element air is imagined as a pale-green hemisphere. The similarity of the ‘colour’ of air with the colour of Green Tārā (and Amoghasiddhi) is more than coincidental. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* strongly suggests the same: ‘On the fifth day, a green light, the purified element of air, will shine.’⁴⁶ ‘Air’, when visualised as part of the *stūpa* meditation practice, is regarded as psycho-spiritual energy freed in all directions simultaneously. This in turn is suggestive of the lack of obstruction and the ability to achieve all things that is associated with the ‘Action’ family of Amoghasiddhi and Tārā.

It seems that in many languages there is the same blurring of boundaries, roots and meaning between the words for wind, spirit, breath and soul. According to Freud, it was the movement of the air that provided the image of spirituality, since the spirit borrows its name from the breath of the wind.⁴⁷ Spiritual experience is often visually communicated in the form of bright light, but in terms of touch or feeling the wind is often used as a descriptor. The wind is something of indescribable power, yet too subtle to be grasped. [136] The Christian apostles spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them as being like ‘a rushing mighty wind’.⁴⁸ Perhaps we could interpret Tārā’s links with the wind in a similar way, being suggestive of the rush of *prīti* associated with visionary experience, or the spontaneous freeing up of psycho-spiritual energy.

TĀRĀ’S VOW

We have not yet examined the most distinctive aspect of Tārā: her outwardly female form. It is significant that, as the consort of Amoghasiddhi, Tārā is associated with the *asura* or titan realm. With Amoghasiddhi she appears on the fifth day of the Bardo to save us from the soft red light of the asura realm, should we have a propensity for it.⁴⁹ The asuras, or ‘jealous gods’ as they are also sometimes called, inhabit a highly competitive world, with power being sought by the men through the use of brute force or cunning and by the women through the use of sexual enchantment. Subhuti tells us that male and female titans represent the extremes of sexual polarization.⁵⁰ So we might well ask, what is a Bodhisattva – indeed an ultimate Refuge – doing in a form such as this? Perhaps it needs to be pointed out that Tārā as Bodhisattva or Buddha is neither truly a woman nor a goddess. Nor is she, to use modern terms which have gained a certain currency, merely an ‘anima figure’ or a ‘role-model’. Like any Bodhisattva she has transcended the polarity of masculinity and femininity. Her beautiful form is just the gateway to a deep inner experience which has neither colour, nor form, nor sex.⁵¹ However, we are told that Tārā chose, in fact *vowed*, to continue working for sentient beings in the *form* of a woman. So what is the significance of her vow?

Long ago, (as mentioned previously, and in tales recorded by the Tibetan historian Tāranātha), in a universe called Manifold Light, there was a princess called Jñāna-candrā who was extremely devoted to the Buddhas. Every day for a million million years she made offerings to the Buddha Dundubhiṣvara (‘Drum-Sound’) and his Sangha. Finally there arose in her the *bodhicitta*, the aspiration, based in compassion, to gain Enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. The *bhikṣus* urged her to pray that she would be reborn as a man in order to develop her Bodhisattva career and eventually become a Buddha. This was because, as we are sometimes told in Buddhist literature, for a [137] woman to progress beyond a certain stage on the Bodhisattva Path she must ‘become a man’. Finally the princess Jñāna-candrā spoke:

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.

And she made the following vow:

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 samsāra is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman’s body!⁵²

She proceeded to become so expert at saving sentient beings that the Tathāgata Dundubhiṣvara gave her the name of Tārā, or She Who Ferries Across.

The significance of Tārā’s vow may best be understood against the background of a variety of attitudes towards women and ‘the feminine’ that had emerged with early Buddhism and were still in process of emerging by the sixth century CE, the period that also saw the emergence of Tārā and other ‘female’ deities in the context of later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna visualisation practices. Relevant to our concern here is the progressive emergence of what Alan Sponberg calls a revalorization of the feminine, in the context of re-stressing ‘the goal of Buddhist practice psychologically as a dynamic state of nondualistic androgynous integration’.⁵³ Particularly significant is the emergence of the so-called ‘female’ Buddhas: Locanā, Māmakī, Pāṇḍaravāsini, Tārā and Ākāṣadhātviṣvarī. More correctly known as the *prajñās* of the five *tathagātas*, so far as I am aware they were first dealt with in the *Guhyasamāja*,⁵⁴ a work generally assigned to the fifth or sixth century CE.⁵⁵ This period, as we have seen, corresponds with the emergence of Tārā as an independent deity and is the period from which Vajrayāna literature begins to give fuller expression to the ideal of the goal of spiritual life being a state of nondual androgyny. It is also probably no coincidence that the colour green, the [138] colour of the most popular form of Tārā, is itself suggestive of androgyny. Green is a mixture of blue and yellow, a synthesis of colours which may be said to correspond to heaven and earth, masculine and feminine.⁵⁶

The use of visualisation practices based around ‘female’ forms such as Tārā and the *ḍākinīs*, the rather wild and elusive female ‘sky dancers’, in Vajrayāna literature and especially the tantric texts needs to be treated with a little caution. David Snellgrove observes that ‘despite the eulogies of woman in these tantras and her high symbolic status, the whole theory and practice is given for the benefit of males’.⁵⁷ Perhaps a similar point could be made about Tārā’s female form and especially her vow to work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman’s body. The symbolism of Tārā can however help us, whether men or women, better to value and integrate the more ‘feminine’ spiritual qualities as part of our development towards a state of nondualistic androgyny. If, as moderns, we understand Tārā’s vow as an assertion that the state of being a woman is superior in terms of spiritual efficacy as compared to that of being a man, or as indicating the primacy, for Buddhists, of feminine symbolism, we would be in danger of undermining the central Buddhist principle of ‘no-self’ (*anātman*). The fact that the individual has ultimately no fixed nature is implicit in Tārā’s opening statement, ‘Here there is no man, there is no woman, no self, no person, and no consciousness’. The significance of Tārā’s vow is perhaps best understood as an encouragement *away* from any over-identification with our sexual form, whether as male or female. So Tārā is a complex figure, integrating many mythical and historical strands, and combining functions on many levels. Her widespread popularity confirms her ability to cater to the varying needs of her devotees. But, one might object, similar observations could be made about a number of Indo-Tibetan Bodhisattva forms. What distinguishes Tārā is her explicit rejection of the exclusive dichotomy between ‘male’ and ‘female’, and this must be allowed for in any attempt to appreciate Tārā’s full significance.

© copyright retained by the author

Notes

- ¹ Sangharakshita, unedited seminar transcript, *Tibetan Book of the Dead Seminar*, p.319.
- ² T.W.Rhys Davids & William Stede (ed), *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, London 1979, p.299.
- ³ Edward Conze (ed.), *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, New York, Harper & Row 1964, p.197.
- ⁴ T.W.Rhys Davids & William Stede, p.620, under Pāli *vitakka*.
- ⁵ For example, Alice Getty, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal 1978, p.119.
- ⁶ Martin Willson, *In Praise of Tara*, London, Wisdom 1986, p.213, verse 7 of Mātṛceṭa's praise and p 302, verse 6 of Gedün-dr'ups praise.
- ⁷ The main textual source for this story appears to be the first verse of *The Praise in Twenty-one Homages* ('Sprung from the op'ning stamens from the Lord of Three Worlds' facial lotus') The *Praise* occurs in two places in the Tibetan Kangyur and it seems the story underwent some expansion in later Tibetan commentaries. See Martin Willson, pp.123-125.
- ⁸ Alice Getty, p.120. Getty gives no explanation or source for this story.
- ⁹ David Templeman (transl.), *The Origin of the Tārā Tantra by Jo-nan Tāranātha*, New Delhi, Library of Tibetan Works & Archives 1981, p.11. The story is also repeated by Martin Willson (p.33). Willson prefers to translate Jñāna-candrā as 'Moon of Wisdom-Knowledge'.
- ¹⁰ Mallar Ghosh, *Development of Buddhist Iconography in Eastern India: A Study of Tārā, Prajñās of Five Tathāgatas and Bhṛīkuṭī*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal 1980, p.16. David Snellgrove seems largely in agreement suggesting the appearance of Tārā 'towards the end' of the period 5th or 6th century CE in *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, Boston, Shambhala 1987, p.317.
- ¹¹ Mallar Ghosh, pp.17-18.
- ¹² Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, Calcutta, Firma KLM, 1987, p.307.
- ¹³ Mallar Ghosh, p.17.
- ¹⁴ Martin Willson, p.96.
- ¹⁵ Mallar Ghosh, p.55.
- ¹⁶ Mallar Ghosh, pp.10-14 and p.31.
- ¹⁷ Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā*, Berkeley/London, University of California 1973, p.3.
- ¹⁸ John Blofeld, *Compassion Yoga: The Mystical Cult of Kuan Yin*, London, Mandala/Unwin 1977.
- ¹⁹ Mallar Ghosh, p.18.
- ²⁰ Examples are in David Templeman, pp.16-21 and Martin Willson, pp.179-185.
- ²¹ David Templeman, p.18.
- ²² Martin Willson, p.306.
- ²³ James Bonwick, *Irish Druids and Old Irish Religions*, Dorset 1986, p.257.
- ²⁴ Barbara G.Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, San Francisco, Harper & Row 1983, p.976.
- ²⁵ Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, Middlesex, Hamlyn 1985, p.25.
- ²⁶ Laurens Van Der Post, *A Story Like the Wind*, England, Penguin 1980.
- ²⁷ Martin Willson, p.309, a praise by Matisāra. See also p.33 for Tāranātha's opening verse to his *Golden Rosary*.
- ²⁸ Martin Willson, p.287 (Chandrakīrti verse 8) and also p.377, note 12.

- ²⁹ Martin Willson, p.420, note 11, Dharmabhadra's commentary.
- ³⁰ Martin Willson, p.269, verse 33 of the *ārya-tārā-sragdharā-stotra*.
- ³¹ Mallar Ghosh p.35. Apparently the reclining form is a miniature in a manuscript in the Cambridge University Library.
- ³² Alice Getty, p.121.
- ³³ Mallar Ghosh, p.38.
- ³⁴ Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali: The Feminine Force*, London, Thames & Hudson 1988, p.63.
- ³⁵ David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass 1987, p.172.
- ³⁶ Sangharakshita, *The Enchanted Heart*, London, Ola Leaves 1980, p.140 ('The Veil of Stars').
- ³⁷ John Gray, *Near Eastern Mythology*, London, Hamlyn 1975, especially pp.21–22 for his coverage of Innana, Ishtar and Athtar. Also useful: Anthony Mercante, *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend*, New York, Facts on File 1988. Interesting but full of dubious correspondences is: Lawrence Durbin-Robertson, *The Goddesses of Chaldea, Syria and Egypt*, Eire, Cesara 1975.
- ³⁸ Margaret and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1977, p.300. The original of this story of Tārā is from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (IV.6), translated by H.H. Wilson.
- ³⁹ I.Velikovsky, *Worlds In Collision*, London, Abacus/Sphere Books 1972.
- ⁴⁰ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, p.200.
- ⁴¹ Mallar Ghosh, p.20.
- ⁴² David Templeman, p.16.
- ⁴³ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, p.196.
- ⁴⁴ David Templeman, p.15.
- ⁴⁵ Mallar Ghosh, p.98.
- ⁴⁶ Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa (transl.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Boulder & London, Shambhala 1975, p.48.
- ⁴⁷ Quoted in Lyall Watson, *Heaven's Breath*, Great Britain, Coronet Books 1985, p.301. Freud's original comment was in his work *Moses and Monotheism*.
- ⁴⁸ For example Acts of the Apostles 2:2 of the *New Testament*.
- ⁴⁹ Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa, p.48.
- ⁵⁰ Dharmachari Subhuti, *The Buddhist Vision*, London, Rider 1985, p.132.
- ⁵¹ Vessantara, *Meeting the Buddhas*, Glasgow, Windhorse 1993, p.174.
- ⁵² Martin Willson, p.34, translated from Tāranātha's *Golden Rosary*.
- ⁵³ Alan Sponberg, 'Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism', essay in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. by Jose Ignacio Cabezon, Albany, State University of New York Press 1992, p.24. Sponberg identifies four distinct attitudes.
- ⁵⁴ Mallar Ghosh, p.95.
- ⁵⁵ Sangharakshita, *The Eternal Legacy*, p.256.
- ⁵⁶ As suggested by Sangharakshita in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* seminar 1979, quoted in *Mitrata 75 (The Tantric Path 3)*, April 1989, Windhorse, Glasgow, p.71.
- ⁵⁷ David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, Boston, Shambala 1987, p.287.