



## The Concept of Goddesses in Buddhist Tantra Traditions

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### Abstract

Tantra has been integral part of several ancient Indic–religious traditions. Its roots are very old, presumably as old as the Mohenjodaro civilization. All of the tantra traditions had a live engagement with the feminine divine. Like other religions in India, Buddhism too has an affiliation with female divinities. The Vajrayāna tradition especially is pervaded with a diverse range of feminine imagery. In Buddhist tantra the symbolism of tantric goddesses and their practices is backed by profound philosophical doctrines. However, unlike other religious tradition, the non-theistic framework of Buddhism does not consider the intrinsic existence of tantric goddesses and their appearance and practices are meant to serve the purpose of transcending all sorts of dualistic thoughts for attaining enlightenment.

This paper inquires into the evolution of tantra in different religious traditions in general, and in Buddhism in particular. The focal point of the discussion is the practices of goddesses in Buddhist tantra. The interaction and influence of other religious traditions on Buddhism too is pointed out. On the one hand this paper explores textual sources for explaining abstract appearances and unusual practices associated with tantric goddesses and on the other, the functional aspects of tantric goddesses in ancient religious settings. The neo-orientalist interpretation of tantra as given by Western scholars is examined to point out their misinterpretations of tantric symbols and rituals. After documenting some of the diverse traditions of goddesses within tantric cults, this paper makes an effort to find harmony between the overlapping layers of popular belief and the profound philosophy of Buddhist tantrism.

**Keywords:** Tantrism, goddesses, Vajrayāna, Yakṣi, feminine imagery, female Buddhas, Chinnamundā Vajrayoginī.

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When I first entered on a study of this *Śāstra*, I did so in the belief that India did not contain more fools than exist amongst other peoples... Behind the unintelligent practice, which doubtless to some extent exists amongst the multitude of every faith, I felt sure there must be a rational principle, since men

on the whole do not continue throughout the ages to do that which is in itself meaningless and is therefore without result. I was not disappointed

(Woodroff 2001: VI).

Since time immemorial, one of the basic motivations of the human mind has been gaining control over visible and invisible natural forces. This ancient quest of molding nature and manipulating it for the benefit of humankind has played a crucial role in the development of modern western science. In the east, this quest of conquering was not only limited to the outer domain but conquest over bodily physical and psychic forces of the inner domain was more emphasized upon. This resulted in the development of pragmatic rituals and practices in the religious system which consisted of techniques that tried to trigger a man's individual energy to harmonize with the universal cosmic energy. Such practices were developed in various religious traditions in India.

The concept behind these practices consisted of a strong association with the idea of symmetrical contiguity such as considering the body as a microcosm of the cosmic macrocosm. The rationale behind it was given as the hypostatized macrocosmic equivalents in the human body (Benard 2010: 83), that is, each part of the body is a homology of a place or a thing in the universe. By accepting this macrocosm-microcosm homology, the practitioner merged the inner effulgence of an individual with cosmic effulgence.

The formalization of such practices took a concrete shape in *Yogasutra* of Pātnjali which appeared around third century CE. However such practices have been part of the religious system in India since a much earlier period of time. Archaeological evidences from the Indus valley civilizations such as the three headed figure of Paśupati depicts yogic practices present at that time. The *Athryva Veda* (Sarasvati 1992: 84) has reference of yogic practices and role of the *prāṇa* (breath) within the body. Different schools of philosophy developed in the post-Vedic period exhibit a tendency to have control over the unseen world through similar means.

In the early medieval period all such practice led to the development of a coherent set of techniques which appeared in a more structured way in all religions. This system was termed 'tantra' which was concerned with a disciplined and systematic method for training and controlling the mind-body complex and reshaping the human consciousness towards a higher spiritual goal.

As the tantric movement gained immense popularity after sixth century CE in northern and central India, every religion had a tendency to have its own form of a tantric system. Around the eighth and ninth century CE, the phenomenon of developing tantric traditions could be observed in all the religious traditions in India which incorporate esoteric practices, deities, mantras and other occult elements. These technique and practices were formulated on indigenous customs and belief systems.

Broadly, Buddhism has been classified into three divisions wherein Tantra or Vajrayāna is considered as the third major *yāna* alongside of Theravada and Mahāyāna. However, there exists another classification which suggests the twofold division of Mahāyāna: Pāramitāyāna—the Sutra vehicle and Mantrayāna—the Tantra vehicle. The tantra tradition, which happened to be an esoteric tradition initially, was later popularized among the common masses by the Siddhachāryas through their miraculous yogic powers. A reference to magical and occult elements could be observed even during the period of the Buddha. There are references in Pāli and Sanskrit sources about the inclination of some of Buddha's disciples towards this. In Dīgh Nikāya's *Aṭānāṭiya Sutta* (David 1921: 190), Vaiśravaṇa can be seen reciting the protection spell

on Gṛīdhakūṭa hill in the presence of the Buddha. Tantric literature claims that Buddha himself preached the doctrine of tantra (Upadhyaya 1999: 231).

Mahāyāna's scholastic tradition which developed around the second century CE led to development of literature containing mantra and the vocabulary of tantra. Several *sūtras* and tantra literature came into existence which later served as Vajrayāna's canonical literature. The early philosophy was symbolically depicted through a personified form of Dhyāni Buddhas and their family which consisted of several divinities (Bagchi 1965: 111).

From the seventh century CE to the tenth century CE, tantric Buddhism continued to develop and various Siddhachāryas popularized it with their tantric-yogic practices and mystical songs known as *Caryāgeeti* and *Caryāpada* compiled in *Dohā Koṣa*. Another distinguishing feature of this phase of Buddhism was adopting the language of the common masses. The language of *Caryāgeeti* and *Caryāpada* which were written by some of the Siddhachāryas was not Sanskrit but the local vernacular. Their teachings also had a great influence on established monastic universities such as Nālandā and Vikramśilā. During this period, tantric Buddhism also made its advent in Tibet, Nepal, Japan and other neighbouring countries and assimilated their local practices and deities into it. Buddhism in this period had an all-embracing nature and incorporated several local traditions.

Early Sanskrit Buddhist textual sources suggested that the seeds of esotericism were inherent in the scriptures of the early Mahāyāna period. One of the earliest records of esoteric rituals can be found in *Mahāyānasutrālaṅkāra* and *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* written by Arya Maitreya in the third century CE (Bhattacharyya 1982: 83). Similarly the ending *dhāriṇi* of the Heart *sutra* which although it does not belong to tantra, shows a tendency towards the development of the mantra tradition.

Tantric Buddhism had its foundation in Mahāyāna philosophy. However, it laid more emphasis on the practice technique than on philosophy. Esoteric practices distinguish tantric Buddhism from Mahāyāna. *Sūtras* important to Mahāyāna became important to tantra too. Guhyasamāja Tantra claims that the reason why it had not been preached before was that there was no one sufficiently learned to understand it (Bhattacharyya 1956: 268). This also indicates that tantric Buddhism happened to be a finer version of Mahāyāna.

Tantric Buddhism used the language of symbolism to illustrate its deeper thoughts. Some deep concepts were represented through the symbolic union of male and female figures. Intuitive wisdom (*prajñā*) was considered to be a passive female quality of human nature while compassionate action was the male quality (*upāya*) and a union of both in the process of enlightenment was represented by an ecstatic union of male and female deities. Such symbolism implied that a similar union of the male and female mode could be experienced on a higher plane of consciousness where all opposites appear in dynamic unity.

The term tantra is derived from the Sanskrit root word 'tan' which means to elongate or extend (Kane 1941: 14). Tantra is practical knowledge to extend the potentiality of individual human consciousness to achieve cosmic effulgence and liberation (White 1998: 263). In its practical aspect, tantra uses a variety of methods to achieve this stage. It consists of a set of spiritual techniques which gradually take the consciousness of the practitioner to a non-dual liberating state. Preliminary tantric practices emphasize the external purity of the body, speech and mind. The body in a correct meditation posture is visualized as a virtual shrine where offerings are made and hand gestures (*mudrās*) are performed. Speech is used for reciting mantras while the mind is used for contemplating upon the deity and imprinting itself with the visual form of deity. The deity here represents some philosophical idea in an anthropomorphic

form. As the practitioner invokes the quality of the deity, he tries to awaken similar features within him.

In Tantric Buddhism at the primary level, the approach is that of having control over sensual desires. However, at the higher level a revolutionary approach of not subjugating but exploring a psychological path of transformation of desire into spiritual bliss is followed. This is achieved through a tantric-yogic process of manipulating subtle wind channels that act as a link between the body and the mind. In the higher stages, the use of transgressive practices associated with the cremation ground and so forth are recommended in tantric texts such as the *Hevajra Tantra* (Farrow and Menon 1992: 172) and the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (Shastri 1984: 110) for achieving an insight of non-dual wisdom.

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

Thus, tantric practices are designed in a way to process the dismantling, the 'conditioned known' and getting to *Sahaja*, the last achievement of all thought perceiving every phenomenon as pure and void (Coomaraswamy 1999: 140). Such ideologies can be commonly found in the verses of the 84 Siddhas of tantric Buddhism, who claimed to be in state of '*Sahaja*'. Traditionally the practice of tantra is supposed to be kept secret. As a result of this tantra has often been subjected to a great deal of misunderstanding. Some of the early researchers wrongly positioned it in the mode of immoral worship with a repulsive outward sign and a strange inner meaning (Urban 2010: 8).

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

In recent decades, some of the Tibetan Buddhist lamas have been more willing to bestow initiations and impart commentary on tantric *sādhana*s and scholars in the academic world have begun compiling and translating tantric teachings and texts. H. H. the fourteenth Dalai Lama's advice (Dhargyey 2006: VII) of partially lifting the secrecy in order to avoid the great misunderstandings, has made the written commentary on some of the secret practices readily available to the academic world.

Early researches on Buddhist tantra were mainly focused on the socio-religious aspect and viewed it more as a magical cult and rituals. Books authored by Herbert V. Guenther, David Snellgrove and Alex Wayman are valuable accounts of Buddhist tantric traditions practiced in Tibet and other Himalayan regions in India. The works of Indian authors such as P. C Bagchi and N. N. Bhattacharyya are also helpful in understanding different tantric traditions in India. Anand Coomaraswamy and Binoytosh Bhattacharyya were amongst the earliest indigenous scholars of Buddhist art and iconography. While Anand Coomaraswamy focused on the idealistic-philosophical aspects of Buddhist art, Binoytosh Bhattacharyya dealt with the iconography of tantric deities and also edited *Niṣpannayogāwali* and two volumes of

*Sādhnamālā* manuscripts obtained from Nepal. In recent years the voluminous works of Lokesh Chandra has also contributed to research of Tibetan and Nepalese iconography. However, the difficulty with these researchers, who are established scholars, research is that they do not have any real experience of tantrism as practitioners. Their explanations about tantric concepts are based on textual accounts. Scholars such as Binoytosh Bhattacharyya have admitted their limitations in this regard (Bhattacharyya 1940: 637).

In the last decade, tantra has also come to the centre of a much larger debate on the politics of scholarship and the interpretation of South Asian traditions. A number of Western scholars and their books such as Jeffrey Kripal's *Kali's Child* (1998), David Gordon White's *Kiss of the Yogini* (1998) and Sarah Caldwell's *Oh Terrifying Mother* (1999) have received strong criticism from some Indian readers for their allegedly hypersexual and neo-orientalist interpretations of tantra.

By and large, much of tantra that we talk about today is a product of the late nineteenth and twentieth century Hindu and Buddhist renaissance in which Western ideas about science, psychoanalysis and mental fitness play a crucial role. With the development of psychoanalysis, researchers on tantra (Child 2007: 5–23) have tried to establish a rational basis for its sexual practices. The Jungian concept of anima (Brown 2001: 9–42) has been used for a conceptual definition of female divinities of Buddhist and Śiva tantra. Similar rationalizations have been widely used by propagators of Indian occult science institutions such as theosophy and the followers of neo-tantra propagated by Osho (formally known as Rajneesh). Osho's commentary on several Buddhist tantric texts has played an important role in popularizing Buddhist tantra and generated a new readership for it. Similarly, Tibetan tantric master Chögyam Trungpa's (Gimian 2003) tantric teachings have led to the evolution of a new generation of tantric Buddhist adepts and scholars who have tried to give tantra a feminist face. In recent years the encouragement given by H. H. Dalai Lama to explore Tibetan Buddhism has given the outside world an opportunity to investigate the rational basis of tantric practices. In this way a massive multi-level hybridization has taken place in the recent decade and mystical aspects of tantric practices have been rationalized to some extent.

Because of the rapidly increasing modern interest in Buddhist tantras, a number of works related to this subject have been published. Some impressive studies on tantric goddesses have also appeared. These studies tend to range across other academic disciplines also; notably the image of the yoginī or dākinī has inspired a large body of cross-cultural and feminist theological discourse. Many writers have drawn upon Buddhist thought in their articulations of feminist epistemology. Rita M. Gross's *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993), examines the feminist history of Buddhism, Tsultrim Allione's *Women of Wisdom* (2000) searches for the spiritual potential of women in Tibetan Buddhism, Simmer S. Brown's *Dākinī's Warm Breath* (2001) interweaves traditional stories of the feminine divine with commentaries by contemporary teachers. Similarly, June Campbell's *Traveler in Space* (2003) is about the female identity in Tibetan Buddhism, Serinity Young's *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts* (2004) tackles a complex issue of sexuality and gender by examining textual and historical data and Miranda Shaw's *Passionate Enlightenment* argues against the subordinate role of women in tantric Buddhism and presents extensive evidence of independent female founders of tantric traditions and their role in establishing a distinctive vision of gender relations.

Apart from these researches which generally rely on Tibetan sources, works by John Locke, David Gellner and Todd T. Lewis have opened up a new discourse on contemporary Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna ritualism and culture of Nepal. By highlighting the 'popular religion'

facet of Buddhism which includes a large degree of practices related to the imagery of goddesses, they examine the ethnographical aspects of rituals, myths and devotional rites practiced by the lay Buddhist community in Nepal.

These books have been published in the last two decades and they deal with questions related to tantrism within South Asian religious culture. Although these books do provide significant insights in understanding the feminine aspects of tantric Buddhism and goddesses, however as Rita M. Gross (2000: 109) points out; "...such discussions cannot be done by outsiders, no matter how knowledgeable and sympathetic they may be."

When we investigate the origin of the goddess cult in Buddhism, we find that there exists a vast inconsistency between textual and material evidence as they do not corroborate each other. The primacy that has been granted to textual sources, despite their obscure nature, creates a further problem. The golden plaque bearing a naked figure of a goddess obtained along with the relics from Piprahwā (Kapilvastu) and the Lauriā-Nandangarh Stupa (Joshi 2011: 41) and the female figures that have been erected in the *vihāras* imply that Buddhism since its inception had a rich tradition of goddesses although we seldom find information about these goddesses in Pāli literature. It could be assumed that the early phase of Buddhism inherited these goddesses from pre-Buddhist traditions. We find some textual evidence in Pāli literature that points towards the all-embracing nature of Buddhism which accommodated local goddesses within the Buddhist framework. Chinese traveller I-tsing reports the presence of statues of yakṣi Hārītī on the porches and in the dining halls in Indian monastic complexes (I-tsing 1966: 37). Similarly, early Buddhist stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi have several labelled reliefs depicting minor female figures as supernatural beings which are believed to be female tree spirits.

The encounter between the yakṣi Hārītī and the Buddha is an excellent example of the conversion of local goddesses to Buddhism (Misra 1979: 73–77). The Buddha steps in to remove a supernatural threat that menaces society at the request of the people of Magadha whose children were being killed by this ferocious goddess. After her encounter with the Buddha, she agrees to give the practice of devouring children and in return the Buddha promises her that she will be given sustenance from the portion of all the goods donated to *vihāras*. Thus, the Buddha quells the anger that drives the goddess's actions. In this manner she was accepted as the goddess in the Buddhist pantheon and featured prominently in early Buddhist literary and artistic traditions throughout India.

Female divinities have had associations with different tantric sects for a long time. It is interesting to see that a fifth-century CE Vaiṣṇava inscription in a temple in Mandasor, which contains the first archaeological reference to tantra, mentions the existence of the Dākinī cult (Lorenzen 2006: 71). This inscription implies that the cremation grounds and mountainous regions were the locus of powerful female spirits such as Dākinīs. At a gross level, the aim of early tantric practices was accessing the power of these terrible female spirits by delighting them with transgressive offerings and inducing them to serve the practitioner's own interests. The Yakṣiṇī practices described in the Buddhist text *Manjuśrīmūlakalpa* (Shashtri 1998: 557) is an example of such practices prevailing in Buddhist traditions around sixth century CE.

*Dīvyāvadāna*, a Sanskrit Buddhist text written around early first century CE mentions a spell of demigoddesses named 'Amale-Vimale'. Śardulakarṇa, a narrative in *Dīvyāvadāna*, (Neil 1886: 611–59) mentions about this spell being practiced by a *Mātanga* woman. The narrative indicates that such practices of sorcery were dispensed by some practitioners who belonged to the lower stratum of ancient Indian society. This form of religion was admittedly doctrinally alien to Buddhism and such rites made little justification to the Buddhist ethical system.

However in this narrative of Divyavadana, the Buddha is also seen to be prescribing a similar remedy to counter the evil caused by sorcery.

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

Some of the cults of goddesses were common in different traditions. For example, the cult of goddess Śrī which is still popular in the Hindu sphere in southern India seems to have existed at the time of the Buddha or even prior to that. Jain literature (Joshi 2011: 40) states that Mahāvīra's mother had an auspicious dream of 'Śrī' prior to Tīrthaṅkara's birth. Around the first century CE, Śrī attained prominence in Buddhism. She is depicted in the relief works of Sānchi and Bharahut. Similarly, the cult of Aparājītā can be traced to the Mauryan period. Kauṭilya's *Arthśāstra* (Chaturvedi 2001: 34) also refers to the cult of Aparājītā. This cult continued till the twelve century CE as the Buddhist text *Sādhanamālā* (Bhattacharyya 1968) mentions *Aparājītā Sādhana*. Her reference appears in *Lalitāsahstranām* and in *Jaina-Rupa-Mandana* (Shah 1987: 285) as one of the forms of the great goddess. In *Harivamsapurāṇa* there are hymns for a mother goddess who holds a peacock feather in her hand (Joshi 2011: 55). She can be identified with one of the Pancarakṣā goddess, Mahāmayurī (Samdarshi 2012: 44–45). In *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* (Anon. 1992: 68) a mantra of Buddhist goddess Kurukullā is recommended for protection from snakes. Several sites of such goddesses can still be identified in various parts of India where Buddhist goddesses are very popular among the Hindus.

The confluence of Śaivism, Śāktism and tantric Buddhism during the Pāla period provided the ground in which cults of female deities sprouted (Shaw 2008: 33). The mutual exchange of female deities between Buddhist and Śākta tantra appears in texts such as *Sādhanamālā* (Bhattacharyya 1968) which were composed during this period.

Another tantric Buddhist text *Cakrasamvaratantra* (Grey 2007) also has close associations with the non-dual Śiva-Bhairava cult. According to this tantric text, the absolute was singular in the ultimate essence, manifesting female and male aspects. The text further states that the male aspect was impotent and could act only through his female consort (Brown 2001: 46). This concept is resonated in the first verse of Śankarāchārya's *Saundaryalaharī* (Brown 1958) where primordial power is hypostatized as goddess Śakti who without her Śiva is ineffectual. In Śākta tantric traditions, the goddess ultimately becomes the primary, all-powerful creator and sustainer of the cosmos.

It is important to note that early tantric traditions were diverse in nature. Most of them had a preoccupation with a powerful goddess, but the understanding, interpretation and application of concepts developed in quite different ways. For example, in Śaivite traditions, the male deity was supreme with a powerful but ultimately subordinate consort (Dwivedi 1970: 49). In Vaiṣṇava Panchrātra tradition (Basu 2008) Lakṣmi as a consort of the god, appears in the twofold dynamic power, Bhūti and Kriya. The Bhuti aspect of Lakṣmi causes the formation of matter and material world while the Kriya aspect of Lakṣmi vitalizes and governs the world.

It can be observed the Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Jaina tantric traditions give less importance to female divinities as compared with their male counterparts. However, Śākta tantra places the goddess in a supreme position. In Buddhist tantra which is similar to Śākta, the superiority of goddesses comes across in a substantial way. In tantric Buddhism, goddesses who embodied supreme enlightenment were designated as "the Buddhas" and "the mother of all Buddhas"

(Shaw 2008: 8). The goal of practices dedicated to such goddesses assured the practitioner that he would be led to Buddhahood during the present lifetime.

This way the tantric Buddhism places some of these female deities at the pinnacle of the pantheon, who personify the highest spiritual goals including Buddhahood. Such female Buddhist divinities are nowadays popularly tagged as ‘Female Buddhas’, a term coined by modern authors such as G. H. Mullin (Mullin and Watt 2003) and Miranda Shaw (2006) (2008). However, due to its cultural baggage, the word ‘Buddha’ still reflects a male figure in our minds though the term is more concerned with the concept of awakening and therefore transcends gender.

The Buddhist pantheon is rich in a varied range of fascinating female divinities; these range from tree spirits to compassionate healers and from wrathful protectresses to a cosmic mother of liberation. These female Buddhist divinities can be broadly grouped in two categories. The first represents cosmic power in a feminine form leading to the highest truth and attainments of liberation, often tagged as ‘Female Buddhas’. This group includes Mahāyāna goddesses such as Prajñāpāramitā and tantric goddesses such as Vajrayoginī and Nairātmyā. The other group consists of goddesses who are invoked to accomplish a range of practical aims such as protection from diseases and enemies, pursuit of knowledge, mental purification and for promoting a gradual progress towards awakening. The iconographic traits and rituals differ according to the contrasting roles and statuses of these goddesses.

Tantric Buddhist texts such as *Sāadhanamālā* (Bhattacharyya 1968) and *Niṣpannayogāwalī* (Bhattacharyya 1972) feature a range of female divinities for specific areas of human needs. On the one hand they feature a range of powerful protectresses such as Sitātapatrā, a guardian against supernatural dangers; Jānguli who protects against harm by snakes and poison; and Parṇaśavari, a healing deity. On the other hand there are divinities for worldly benefits such as Vasuādhārā, who is the bestower of wealth and abundance; Uṣṇīśavijayā, who confers long life and a fortunate rebirth; and Cundā, who inspires and supports spiritual practices.

Tārā happens to be the most prominent female deity of Himalayan Buddhism. She is a principal example of a female Buddha who actually achieved enlightenment. According to the Sūtra tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (Rinpoche 1999: 21) prior to her enlightenment, she was a Bodhisattva, and was promised that after she reached awakening she would always appear in a female form for the benefit of all living beings. However, as a fully awakened Buddha in the Tantra tradition, Tārā is looked to for attaining enlightenment. Thus, depending on the tradition, she has different manifestations. Goddesses in semi-wrathful female forms, such as Nairātmya, may wear ornaments of skulls and bones and trample upon a male deity. They embody fierce energy used in tantric practices to change old habits of the mind and are the personifications of one of the core philosophies in Buddhism, that all things are without ego and without a true inherent nature of their own.

It is also commonly accepted in tantric literature that the deities do not have a fixed form and they may appear as per the visualizations of the practitioner. The deities are referred to as mind-made formations (*manomayakāya*) of the practitioner’s own consciousness (Pandey 2001: X). Different forms and physical features of these goddesses are symbolic and given in a coded language that is explained in tantric manuals. Depending on the specific enlightened qualities that they embody, the goddesses may have peaceful or wrathful appearances. The *sādhans* prescribed for these goddesses are meant to destroy or transform habits of the mind, often by radical, unconventional methods.

Visualization is a major component to tantric practices. Most of the tantric goddesses are visualized with multiple heads, arms and legs, representing the multi-functional nature of an enlightened mind which they embody. They have key identifiers such as postures, hand gestures or symbols and colours to tell who they are and what they represent. As these goddesses embody Buddhist ideals, their forms are created in art for contemplation and used as a tool for spiritual development.

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

In the Tibetan tradition, tantra has been classified into a fourfold system: Kriyā Tantra, Charyā Tantra, Yoga Tantra and Anuttarayoga Tantra. The diverse array of practices related to goddesses has also been categorized accordingly. In Kriyā and Charyā Tantra, goddesses are visualized as external entities and their practices consist of devotion and rituals while goddesses embodying the more advanced yogic practices are part of Yoga Tantra and Anuttarayoga Tantra. Anuttarayoga Tantra is further divided into Mother Tantra and Father Tantra. Most of the Mother Tantra practices consist of self-visualization in which the practitioners visualize themselves as the central meditational goddess of an elaborate, elegant mandala. However, here the goddess has to be visualized precisely with her non-inherent existence emanating from the wisdom of clear light of emptiness. Mother Tantra also consists of yogic practices of dealing with the systems of the central wind channel of the subtle body in order to gain the subtlest level of blissful awareness (Gyatso 2000: 202–13).

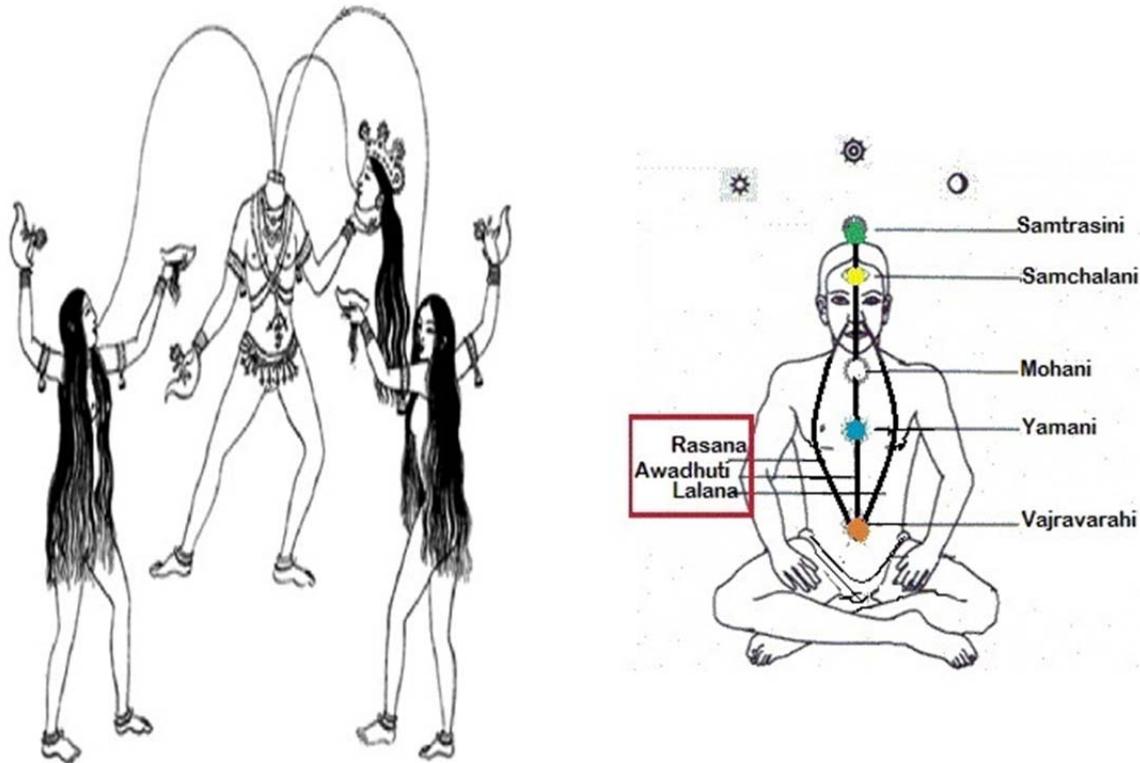
Vajrayoginī is one of the most popular meditational deities of Mother Tantra. Conceptually, she is an embodiment of wisdom (*prajñā*), representing the feminine aspect of one's innate nature and the clarity gained from the discriminating awareness in female form. She is one of the most often cited deities in tantric texts and there exist a number of praise verses (*stotra*) dedicated to her in different tantric texts (Pandey 1994: 208–12). Most of the Anuttarayoga Tantra texts such as *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (Shastri 1984: 1) and *Hevajra Tantra* (Farrow and Menon 1992: 3) start with an opening verse which quotes the Buddha residing in the embryo (*bhaga*) of the Vajrayoginī as she is the essence of the body, speech and mind of all the Tathāgatas.

Chinnamundā is one of the forms of Vajrayoginī in which she manifests in a three-body form (Benard 2010: 74–75). This form of Vajrayoginī is also referred to as Trikāya Vajrayoginī in *Guhyasamaya Tantra* (Pandey 1994: 212) and Bhaṭṭārikā Vajrayoginī in *Sādhnamālā* (Bhattacharyya 1968: 453).

Chinnamundā, which literally means severed-headed, is the self-decapitated form of Vajrayoginī. In this unusual form, Vajrayoginī appears with her two attendant yoginīs, Vajravairochanī and Vajravārṇanī. In Śakta tantras Chinnamundā is named as Chinnamastā where she is amongst the ten great wisdom (*Daśmāhvidyā*) goddesses. Śakta practitioners visualize her as an external entity while in Buddhism she is a personal meditational deity, existing not outside the practitioner's own mind.

One of the prominent sources for Vajrayoginī practices is *Sādhnamālā*, (Bhattacharyya 1968: 452–58) in which her seven *sādhanas* are given. *Sādhana 232* portrays her as: The practitioner should visualize one's navel as an opened white lotus surmounted by a red solar disk. On the top of that is a *Hṛim* (*the seed Mantra of Vajrayoginī*). This *Hṛim* transforms into the yellow colored Vajrayoginī who is holding her own self-severed head

in her left hand and a scimitar in her right hand.... Three streams of blood spurt out from her severed body as falling into the mouth of her severed head and into the mouths of the two yoginis, Vajravarnanī, blue in color to her left and Vajravairochanī, yellow in color to her right both of whom hold a scimitar in their left and right hand respectively, and the skull cup in the right and left hands respectively.... Their hair is disheveled. On all sides in the intermediate space between the yoginīs is the very frightening cremation ground.



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

The esoteric meaning of this 'awful' depiction of the goddess is hidden in yogic practice which is related to the three major wind channels (*nāḍī*) of the subtle body commonly known as Lalanā, Rasanā and Awadhūtī in Buddhist tantra. The practice manual of Vajrayoginī, *The guide to Dakinī Land* (Gyatso 2000: 218) states that the inner winds are special subtle energy that flows through channels when the mind is engaged with an external object or activity. The wind that flows through the left and right channels is impure and causes the false notion of a self-intrinsic existence of the phenomenal world, obscuring the experience of clear light emptiness. When the central channel, which is pure in nature, is invoked, the practitioner experiences the falling off of the false notion of selfhood (*ātma-grāha*) which gives rise to wisdom of great bliss and the two other left and right wind channels continue to exist drawing their source from the central channel.

This yogic *sādhana* has been portrayed in an anthropomorphic representation of Chinnamundā Vajrayoginī in which she represents the central wind channel while her two

attendants represent the left and right auxiliary channels. The five energy-nodes (*Chkaras*) that pass through the central wind channel are also labelled as tantric goddesses.

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

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

One should also keep in mind that in tantric Buddhism, the concept of a goddess appears in the framework of non-theism, which means that there is no external supreme being, and hence all religious symbols of a divinity, rituals and doctrines have just conventional utility rather than being the ultimate truth.

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