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## Tantric Buddhist Art: Through an Integral Lens

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Tantric Buddhist art is a very diverse and unique form of art. Its main goals are to reveal the nature of reality by showing the perceiver that there is a more expansive and actualized being than the one currently experienced. In this way it shares many similarities with religious art, but puts its own special non-dual twist on religious art that will engage and surprise the reader.

Keywords: art, Tantric Buddhism, consciousness, meditation

**T**antric Buddhist art is a spiritual and further, transformative style of art that emerged in India and Tibet by the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, CE. It is meant to transmit, convey, and support the growth of an exalted and more spiritually advanced way of being in its participants, and interacts with practitioners in a wide variety of forms: dance, gesture, painting, sculpture, chant, song, and a symbolic visionary world called mandala. In this paper, we will dive into these different forms of Tantric Buddhist art from an integral perspective, incorporating I, We, and It, known by Ken Wilber as the big three (Wilber, 1995), as a lens through which to view this art form from multiple perspectives, to further a cohesive understanding of the core intention and effect of this unique and spiritually oriented art style. The I, focuses on the inner understanding and effect of interacting with this sacred art from the perspective of the practitioner – how certain images and statues intend to effect the mind of the practitioner and the experience had through relating to the images with a devotional and practice attitude. The We alternately focuses on the aspect of the interaction between the image and the practitioner, and also dives into the group and partnered practices connected to these deities. The It focuses on the historical details, styles of sculpture and

painting, the historical sites of Tantric Buddhist art, and the three bodies that Buddha's are said to emanate in, the physical body, the energetic body, and the ultimate body of awareness itself.

### **Introduction to Indo Tibetan Buddhism:**

Although there are many places that have housed Buddhist Tantra, none have kept it in such a full and complete way as Tibetan Buddhism has. The highlands of the Himalayan Mountains did not always house the spiritually minded monastics of Buddhism. Rather, during the years before the 7<sup>th</sup> century, C.E., the Tibetan peoples practiced a animistic religions that were much more involved in animal sacrifice, sorcery, and other types of magic than the rigorously organized system(s) of later Tibetan Buddhism and its many saints and masters.

Buddhism was founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, B.C.E. by the philosopher and saint, Siddhartha Gautama. Born into feudal India, he lived an exalted life for the time, and spent much of his young adult life in the confines of the palace of a feudal lord. When he was young, it was prophesized that he would either be a great warrior, or a holy man. Determined to have his son turn into a great warrior-king, the boy's father the king secluded the boy from all things that might turn him into the holy man, and supported all things that would turn him into a proper king.

But soon enough the boy became disillusioned from his caste, the place he held in society, and rebelled by leaving the palace under disguise that would allow him to see things without the one sidedness of his father's supervision. On three successive trips outside of the palace, he had the good fortune of encountering what he would later call the three marks of existence, old age, sickness, and death. On his last trip, he also noticed a wandering ascetic, which inspired him to lead the life of a renunciate, and become a holy man.

During that time, it was not enough to simply come up with a philosophy that made sense of things, the philosopher saint had to personally investigate his or her own reality through direct practice, understood during the time as yoga, this term means to unite oneself with one's inner investigations and more broadly with the nature of reality itself.

Through trial and error the historical Buddha undertook these many different investigations through deep meditative training, through asceticism, through many different means and methods. What he found was that basically sentient beings suffer, but there is an inherent freedom to experience that is beyond suffering, and there is a method or means to achieve this state beyond suffering.

During his lifetime he taught hundreds of thousands of individuals, and while he was said to never write anything down, there are many, many accounts of his teachings. Many of which contradict each other. From the perspective of scholastic Tantric Buddhism, there were a few different important stages of his teaching, referred to commonly as vehicles. The first and most basic vehicle had to do with his historical life, the practice of monasticism, and carrying out the four noble truths with the explicit intention of reducing one's suffering. The second vehicle happened later, around the second century, C.E., and had a more expansive, inclusive intention. The doctrines were explicitly messianic, and involved an individual who was only satisfied with their own liberation through liberating all sentient beings in the universe. Here arose most clearly the notions of wisdom and compassion as skillful means, and discussed in detail a wider array of skillful teaching tools that aspiring enlightened Buddhas, called Bodhisattvas or awakening heroes, could use in their enactment of the spread of wisdom-compassion and the liberation of beings.

Buddhist art in this period flourished, and with the rise of Buddhist Tantra, moved from being representational to having an interactive function as a symbol of the evolved forms of consciousness that are present in every living being. The Tantric vehicle is understood to be the vehicle of technology, and employs many different means to achieve liberation. Because of the variety and skill needed to implement its means, and their power, it is not traditionally shared publicly, but instead transmitted from teacher to disciple through the ages. While the aims of Tantra are the same as that of the second vehicle, the perfection of wisdom and compassion, it takes a different approach in practice.

Here, negative forces such as desire, ignorance, or anger are not seen as necessarily contradictory or harmful in the path to experience freedom, rather, they are seen as pure energies to be transformed into the energy of enlightenment. This shows up in the art, and the images begin to take on wrathful, demonic

shapes as well as peaceful, serene images. The images are seen as embodiments of the transformed aspects of the emotions and impulses of such things as desire and anger. Where in the first and second vehicles, things like desire and anger are seen as things to be avoided, in the Tantric forms, they are understood to be powerful energies of transformation, waiting to be harnessed for the greater good. The understanding that all experience can be harnessed towards the path to enlightenment is key to understanding the art that came out of this worldview, passionate, explicit, and often burning with emotive intensity.

### **Tantric Buddhist Art: Skillful Means**

When the second vehicle was at its peak in India, during the first and second century, C.E., there was an emphasis on the many, many lifetimes it took to perfect the virtues of the enlightening hero. Some of these heroes took to unconventional methods by which to become enlightened, as oppose to the more traditional monastic's and lay followers who adhered more closely to the Buddhist scriptures on conduct. These unconventional methods involved intense periods of visualization, ritual, physical and psychophysical yoga's, and extensive periods of meditation. Buddhist art began to reflect these changes in Tantric Buddhist orthopraxy by giving meditators images and statues that would support their visualizations while engaging in these exalted meditative methods. So this art became a way for these teachings to come alive in the visionary realm, and for practitioners to access and incorporate these beyond the logical mind teachings into their lives.

### **The I, We, It of Tantric Buddhism**

**It**

The author would like to first begin with the objective, externalized account of Tantric Buddhist art. Within this vast field, I will hone in specifically on Tibet, because it can be arguably said to contain the largest storehouse on Tantric art in the world. Through 600 C.E., Buddhism was flourishing in India, with large universities, many spiritual adepts, and throngs of monastics.

### **Three bodies**

There are said to be three main forms that enlightened presence takes when teaching, or three ways that the teacher and teachings manifest in the world. The first of these is the physical body that enlightened Buddha's inhabit during their lives on earth. These are said to be *bliss* bodies, because their inhabitants are said to be in a state of perpetual bliss. Another body is said to be inhabited by all Buddhas, and all sentient beings for that matter, although it is unrecognized in that case; this is the supreme body, the ultimate sphere of reality. Here Buddhahood is said to always be accessible, and the Buddhas are said to exist here in an unchanging manner. The last kind of body relates to these divine images and paintings that you find in Tantric Buddhism and these are called the energetic or visionary body. This is the body that the Tantric paintings often depict, and it is this inner and visionary realm that Buddhist Tantra often works with.

### **Pure Lands**

Pure Lands are the visionary realms, or heavens, that the awakening heroes establish and inhabit. These lands are pure in the sense that they are solely made for practices that lead toward enlightenment. The notion of reincarnation plays in strongly here, and individual awakening heroes are understood to practice in many of these pure lands before incarnation as saints or adepts in this realm called earth. The historical Buddha himself is said to have descended from a pure land called Tushita and into his mother's womb. Heaven realms in the Buddhist sense are slightly different from heaven in the western sense, because they are seen as places that are temporary and pleasant abodes, but not eternal places of rest.

During the expansion of the second vehicle in India, during the first and second centuries, B.C.E., the past lives of the historical Buddha, as well as the lives of many of his main disciples began to be analyzed. The Buddha had lived countless lives as an aspirant towards enlightenment before being born into his final and exalted life. These lives were told and examined for the purposes of spiritual growth, and the entourage of disciples were also often seen as extraordinary beings that were on a similar path towards ultimate enlightenment. The Buddha lands that these aspiring heroes fashioned were understood

slightly differently than simply the individuals themselves, they were seen as the fruition of an individual living an enlightened life and effecting an entire environment with that consciousness. They were lands that not only held Buddhas, but were the co-emerging field from which Buddhahood flourishes.

The most well known of these pure lands is the land of Amitabha Buddha, called the pure land of perfect bliss, there: Amitabha lives in an ethereal body that radiates thousands of light rays to all galaxies in the solar system, attracting in even the most devilish of beings to practice spiritual growth. While in the pure land of Amitabha, the aspirant need not worry about worldly sustenance or age, like ordinary realms, and can instead focus on practicing the teachings of Buddhism. There are many other celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as well, that have fashioned pure lands, but this is the most widely known.

As the Tantric understanding became more refined, the notion of a protected realm became more popular, and developed into the mandala principle, which essentially means a protected space where individuals can fully practice meditation and the path to enlightenment without distraction. The principle of the mandala is slightly different, although very similar, to pure lands, though. Specifically, Mandala's can be created with the mind of the practitioner, in the moment, to support meditation practice, as opposed to pure lands which are developed over millennia, pure lands are ever accessible through the visionary realm of imagination.

One of the most important Tantric saints of Tibet, and a figure of historical and personal significance for the author, also has a pure land that is said to correlate with a realm on earth. It is the great seventh century adept Padmasambhava, and his realm called the glorious copper colored mountain. This is a land with a visionary significance beyond that of the pure land of perfect bliss, in that its inhabitants are both peaceful and wrathful embodiments of enlightened energy. It has charnel grounds as well as palaces, and both are central to its ability to liberate its inhabitants. The charnel grounds represent everything that is challenging, dead, and decaying about the practitioner, those aspects of negative emotions that need more forceful removal. The charnel ground bestows, through practice, an ability to sit in the middle of chaos, death, and destruction whilst upholding an enlightened intention.

## **Tibetan Tantric Art**

Tibetan Tantric arts goal is the revelation of the true nature of reality, and it's intellectual corollary is Buddhist philosophy and practice. Because of this goal, the aesthetic of the Tantric art style is aimed at this purpose, and this purpose alone. Some gifted and visionary practitioners have the unique ability to spontaneously encounter these exalted realms of bliss and wisdom, gather the wisdom from the encounter, and share these enlightening revelations with other eager practitioners through art, through their style of living, and through liturgies. These all embody the essence of the art itself in a skillful process of helping others wake up themselves. In this way, the deities represented in the art are personified in the life of the practitioner, and their embodied wisdom becomes active and engaged with the greater community. This allows the art to become a vehicle, a carrier of the realization of the truth of reality, to make it take shape and energize it with action, an engagement with the world in the true Buddhist sense.

Let's now turn to art, during some of the earlier representations we find images of single deities, or deities and retinue. These images are of the ideal realm of imagination, where the perfected bodies of the deity exist in relation to, but outside of, conventional space time. Other examples that we will look at represent saints and siddhas, or accomplished adepts; these are usually placed within historical time and are understood to be lineage masters. In the author's own tradition, as well as other Tantric Buddhist traditions, these two different kinds of representation are blurred, and the historical saint becomes, through his life story, a deity along with his consort.

Each of the images is an embodiment of certain qualities of wisdom and compassion that the deity reveals and conveys. Since there is so much historical and philosophical detail involved in Buddhist Tantra, iconography also becomes an important means by which the images convey their stories, meaning, and power.

## **Brief History of Buddhist Tantric art in Tibet**





Starting in the early sixth century, C.E. there were three religious kings, starting with Songtsen Gampo. Gampo united the many Tibetan Kingdoms and took a few princesses from Nepal as well as China, who convinced them of the import and benefit of Buddhism.

Songtsen Gampo built the most popular statue of the Buddha in Lhasa, Tibet's capitol city. The styles in the construction of this temple are reminiscent of some of the older, fifth century Indian temples.

While smaller temples were built by the first of the Dharma Kings, it wasn't until the second king that supported Tantric Buddhism that a large scale monastery where teachings and extensive meditation trainings could be conducted.

Although the project had the support of the king, there were sorcerers and demonic forces at work that became obstacles to the building of the first monastery. The philosopher saint, Shantarakshita advised the Buddhism supporting king, Trisong Deutsen, to invite the Magician Yogi Padmasambhava to help vanquish the negative forces and obstacles and restore order to the building of the monastery. He complied and arrived, laying out a sacred mandala that protected the area on which the monastery could be successfully built.

Another source of Buddhist art from an earlier period is from Dunhuang, which are a series of caves that were dug out during the time of the Han Dynasty 2-3<sup>rd</sup> century, B.C.E., and filled with a variety of Buddhist art spanning a thousand years. Most of the art in these caves represents Chinese styles at the time, but there is also the influence of Tibetan, Indian, and Nepalese styles in the art.

Following the reign of three Tantric Buddhism supporting kings, there was a period of decline for Buddhism in Tibet and the surrounding regions. For about a hundred years, Buddhism was decentralized in Tibet, and the arts and compositions of philosophical and liturgical materials slowed to almost a halt.



There was another transmission of Buddhism to Tibet from India, and this occurred around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and most often in the northern regions of Tibet. This was a time of significant cultural and religious upliftment in Tibet, and was a very exciting time for philosophy and practice in the area as well.



There were two major areas of artistic proliferation western Tibet and the central areas of Ü and Tsang. In central Tibet, there is a strong influence of dynastic India, where as in central Tibet there is a strong influence of Kashmiri Shaivism, a sect of practice oriented towards Tantric Hinduism.

The basis of this transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet, during this cycle, rested on a king called Yeshe Ö, who commissioned twenty five translators to go to Tibet and receive teachings and bring them back. He also called on a teacher, Atisha Dipamkara to come to Tibet and give teachings. While only two of the translators came and Atisha finally made it, the translators brought with

them many artisans to furnish the sculptures and art of the time. What follows is a sculpture of one of the coming heroes of enlightenment, Maitreya, who is said to descend to earth in the next five hundred years or so and liberate the earth's inhabitants. Some of his hand implements indicate a connection to Kashmiri Shaivism, or Shiva worship, and it is probably carved around 1000 C.E.

One of the best exhibits of this period and style is in Tabo Monastery, in Himachal Pradesh, northern India. In this collection of paintings, you can see the expression of each of the three vehicles' styles and presentations of the Buddhist teachings. On the first level are representations of the historical Buddha and his teachings on the four noble truths, on the second level are the teachings of the great vehicle, and on the third level are the

deities of Tantra. All three levels are seen as mutually interdependent and important aspects of achieving liberation from suffering. In this way, the aesthetics of Tantric Buddhist history embody the teachings that inspire them.



When the author used to spend time studying and practicing at Sakya Monastery, in Seattle, WA, he saw some similar patterning. The historical figures that carry on the lineage are surrounding one, along with images of the wheel of suffering, cyclic existence and its demons (negative emotion). Through the center are images of the historical Buddha, and saints and sages of the lineage present to inspire and lend their life experience as guidance for practice. Above are the hosts of deities of the many Tantras and their mandalas. Especially on the ceiling and on the insides of the shrine are those images that less people have the privilege to see, those images that are paradoxical in nature, or those that evoke passion or anger to the untrained and uninitiated. It is common for these places to be arranged according to different worlds. Here is a picture of the heavenly realms painted on the ceiling of Sakya Monastery, in Seattle, WA.

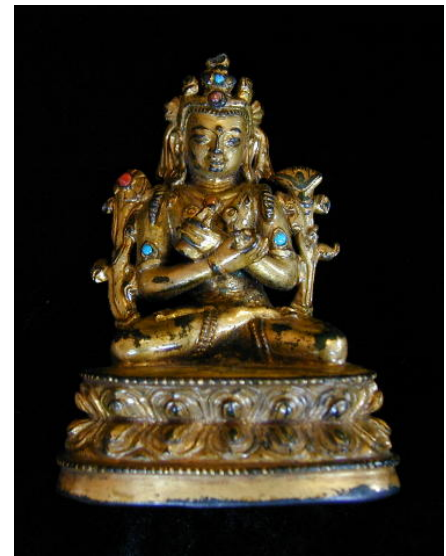


After spending three years in western Tibet, the great teacher and scholar Atisha decided to move to central Tibet to continue to spread his teachings and influence there. In part because of his influence and uncommon teaching

abilities, in the latter half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, many of the other schools of Tantric Buddhism also flourished throughout Tibet. The Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Geluk orders all grew and flourished at this time. From here until the fifteenth centuries, there was a diversity of styles that influenced Tantric Buddhist painting in Tibet and the Himalayas.

There was also diversity in styling regarding sculptures as well, especially in the sculpture of the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, where both spiritual adepts and deities are represented with intensity and grace. Vajradhara is said to be one of the most important deities according to some of the new schools of Tantric Buddhism, and here is a fifteenth century statue of him. The style on this statue is more characteristic of the Chinese styles, with more drapery covering him with extra jewels and ornaments.

The fifteenth century saw an expansion of one particular school of Buddhist Tantra, the Gelukpa school, in central Tibet. The art began to take on a synthetic flavor, using abstraction, a combination of methods and techniques, and the original intention of conveying enlightened energy took on a unique form in central Tibet. Here is another image of Maitreya Bodhisattva, who is supposed to be this eon's future Buddha.





### **Nyingma, Sakya, Gelug, Kagyu – The Four Schools of Tantric Buddhism**

Sometimes subtle, and sometimes overt, there are some major differences in the practice and philosophy of the four major Buddhist schools of Tibet, and one could argue that there is one more school that has

recently tried to group itself with Buddhism more firmly, called Bon. The first came during the reign of the first Dharma Kings, and is aptly called the Nyingma school, or the oldest order. This is the lineage of practitioners that the author most strongly identifies with. This was the only school that was transmitted during the first great wave of Buddhism as it was transmitted to Tibet. The other three schools, the Sakya, Geluk, and Karma Kagyu were all transmitted by different translators and scholars from India to Tibet.

The head of the Nyingma order is commonly known as Padmasambhava, the lotus born. This is a saint that brought Tantric Buddhism to Tibet in the first place, and is known for subjugating the demonic forces mentioned earlier to establish the first monastery. He wears a crown and an eagle's feather, a symbol of inner vision. His right hand holds a Vajra and bell, the symbols for enlightened masculine and feminine energies. In his left hand, he holds a skull cup that is filled with blood, symbolizing the defeat of egotism. In the nook of his arm, he holds a staff, which has three prongs. On each of the prongs sit a head, all in various states of decay symbolizing the overcoming of passion, aggression, and ignorance. Because of the cropping of the picture, only the hat and skull cup are clearly visible.



The Sakya order followed the second transmission of teachings from India into Tibet, and was maintained by a family lineage, that of Khon, up until the present day. They utilized the teachings of the Indian saint, Virupa as inspiration, and many relied on the deity that he practiced with, Hevajra. He is usually depicted holding a gesture that is characteristic of his life story. Once he happened upon a town in which he wanted to have influence. Being a Tantric adept instead of a monk, one of the natural destinations for him was the town pub. After promising to pay his tab at nightfall, he then stopped the descent of the sun and proceeded to drink most of the liquor in the town. In a state of alarm, someone got ahold of the king, who paid Virupa's bill and wondered at his powers. After receiving this recognition, Virupa began to teach meditation to the townspeople. In this photo, you can clearly see Virupa's hand held out to the sun, as well as his cup for alcohol. Interestingly, the major schools of Tantric Buddhism are started not by scholars per se, but by spiritual adepts who were possessed of certain powers.



The Kagyu order is no different, their lineage stems from Naropa, an abbot of Nalanda University. The name itself means acting on the oral instructions, and implies that the instructions for meditating were transmitted from master to student, in an unbroken lineage direct from the head of the lineage. Naropa, the great scholar sought out the direct experience from his studies, and thus had a great meditation master of his time take him under his wing and expose him to trials and tribulations so that Naropa could attain realization. After this, a translator known as Marpa underwent huge trials and tribulations to find Naropa and bring the sacred texts back with him from the land of India to Tibet. Most famous of the trio, was the yogi-saint Milarepa, who was put through some of the most arduous trials under Marpa in the snowy caves of the Himalayas in his search for enlightenment. This is



probably the most popular yogi-saint in all of Tibet. He was known for his magical abilities, and his extensive cave dwelling. This was so extensive, in fact, that he was purported to have turned green from only subsisting on a species of nettle that grew outside of his caves. Milarepa was a true meditation master, and spawned a series of meditation devotee's. Here he is depicted wearing the rags that are reminiscent of his name, with hand to ear so that he can hear the sound of emptiness, and a hand cradling an alms bowl. This school

was known especially for its dedication to practice and realization, but has recently fragmented because of infighting and changes in leadership.

Towards the middle of the eleventh century, a Buddhist scholar and saint named Je Tsongkhapa began a Tantric Buddhist reformation that went back to Atisha's earlier teachings. This was to be the strongest reformation that Tibetan Buddhism had ever seen, and produced more art and philosophy than any of the other schools of that time. This school grew into the largest of the four Tibetan Buddhist schools, and dominated in the philosophical and political life. They focused more on scholasticism than meditation, which lent itself to the establishment of a strong monastic culture. This was the lineage that eventually gave rise to Tibet's Dalai Lama's, and was the most significant force in culture and arts in Tibetan Buddhism to date. While Tsongkhapa was recognized as an adept, he was also uniquely recognized as a scholar and someone who had achieved enlightenment itself. Here he is depicted with a scholar's curved cap with hands in the gesture of teaching Dharma.

Here I have briefly outlined parts of the history of the four main schools of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet, and discussed a bit about their art styles and intentions using the medium of statues and paintings of the school's founders. Now the author would like to go



more in depth into the school of meditation that he practiced, and show the deities that one works with throughout the different stages of meditation practice. This tradition maintains that the mind goes through different and distinct evolutionary steps on the path towards enlightenment, and there are different images of deities that correspond to this enlightening trajectory. Since this is the way that the author was trained, there will be personal stories added in, and lots of direct experience, in an attempt to make the material more digestible, relevant to everyday life, and entertaining.

### **Nyingma: The nine vehicles that correspond to the evolving minds of practitioners**

While the complexity of mind and development is said to correspond to the complexity of the teaching one practices, the Nyingma school, perhaps more than others, introduces the most complex and subtle earlier on than other styles of Tantric Buddhism, and these themes run through the practices and teachings in a recurring theme.

The first teachings and practices undertaken by a practitioner center around the processes of what are called taking refuge and cultivating Bodhichitta, these are considered the most important and therefore are the foundations of practice, and most traditional yogi's begin with a practice of doing 100,000 prostrations, or bows in which one presses their body into the ground, to an image known as the refuge tree, or the tree of all teachers in this life. It usually has a picture of the historical Buddha in the middle, and in the author's own lineage, it also has a picture of Padmasambhava, and many other lineage Gurus. It depicts the historical disciples of the Buddha, and an entourage of celestial heroes for enlightenment. There are protector deities that are positioned outwards to prevent external obstacles, but also inwards to guard the mind of the practitioner, to make sure that no realization leak out unnecessarily. My own teacher stressed the importance of using this image and doing the refuge practice, which involves prostrating oneself, he suggested that I focus on visualizing all those I come into contact with, including my ordinary teachers integrated into this visualization. He suggested that one important aspect of many people's realization is the understanding that all circumstances can be our teacher, and it is important to be open to this when living my daily life.





The second set of practices also includes a visualization of this refuge tree, and the practitioner engages in visualizing all of the positive merit and wisdom embodied by the refuge tree, especially the compassion inherent in the field, and absorbs it through the top of the head, feeling that the qualities become absorbed into oneself. The process is augmented by extensive practices where the visualization centers around giving the benefit oneself has unselfishly to others and absorbing their pain and suffering without regret, imagining the beings one saves as one's own

mother. This second set of visualizations, while not as basic as taking refuge, is really the heart and essence of the realization that comes from the rest of the practices. The first two of these practices are understood to be part of the ordinary or exoteric vehicles that are common and shared publicly.

The next set of practices is the first that technically belongs to the set of Tantric practices. It involves purification practices, and in the complex sequence of practices this is the practitioners' first exposure to a higher and more advanced kind of visualization. In this kind of practice, one begins to see oneself as the deity, instead of propitiating a deity from afar, through a process of chanting ritual and visualization, the deity becomes oneself, and shines enlightening energy throughout the cosmos,



*Mandala hand gesture*

liberating anything that it touches. The sequence of the practice is very intense, and begins with the practitioner recalling everything that he or she has done wrong since beginning less time. They then repent for their mistakes, and ask for absolution from the deity, Vajrasattva.

The themes of non-duality begin to show themselves in this ritual, for the very substance that purifies the practitioner is the sexual essence produced by the deity with consort. They are white symbolizing purity, and hold a vajra – the symbol of Tantra itself in addition to the thunderbolt and male phallus, as well as a bell, symbolizing the energy of the enlightened feminine. This is truly a gateway image for beginning practitioners to become acquainted with, and engage in the beginnings of a living practice with Tantric Buddhist art.

Next for the practitioner is an introduction to generosity, and the principle of the mandala. The mandala is a very special and important understanding in Tantric Buddhism, because it encompasses the notion that we create the world we live in through the activity of our mind. Here, the practitioner is instructed that there are many versions, or levels, of reality that are accessible to all; we just have to have the acumen and intention to see and experience them. In this practice, one visualizes all things as a pure land and all the inhabitants as Buddhas. The practitioner then gives all his possessions away in a gesture of generosity, keeping nothing back. It is a very powerful practice that can strongly orient the practitioner to the feeling of open generosity, and it is invaluable if used correctly.

Often, there are adepts that are in circumstances where they are extremely poor or visualizations giving things away are not suitable for them. For these types of people, the Nyingma (and other traditions) have a practice called cutting through. This practice started in the charnel grounds of ancient India, and involved adepts practicing in the midst of corpses, wild animals, robbers, and a host of other dangers. The practice involves, instead of seeing oneself as a celestial king who gives the entire known universe away, one offers one's own body instead to any and all that one might have a connection to or



debt to. It developed out of a more traditional form of exorcism, and was (and still is) used to that end. Because of the visualized gore, the practice is intense, and can cause some discomfort and a bit of craziness to those that are not very grounded and stable. Here you can see Vajrayogini amidst a blaze of swirling fire, she is wearing nothing but a garland of heads, and carries a staff with three heads symbolizing the defeat of passion, aggression and ignorance. The requirements for most Nyingma yogis are a hundred thousand recitations of the Chod mantra.

To conclude the preliminary practices for the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, a more detailed empowerment involving Padmasambhava is undertaken. This is a lengthy visualization and liturgical endeavor, with the central aim of using devotion to the Guru to realize a glimpse of the mind of enlightenment. This is supposed to be the most essential practice if one is to understand what the mind of enlightenment is, and therefore habituate oneself to it. Here, the direct relationship with the Guru is seen as paramount of this step, primarily because no amount of logic or intelligence can defeat logic and intelligence itself, for the deluded mind to be overcome, a more direct and experiential non conceptual introduction that only one with extensive experience, like an accomplished Guru can bestow.

One of the main wrathful deities of the Nyingma order is called Vajrakilaya. This deity focuses primarily on destroying negative emotions, and is used especially during the period's right before the New Year, to forcefully remove obstacles to health, happiness, and enlightenment. These deities are used to remove any and all forces that inhibit boundless compassion. My own teacher recommended that I use this practice in the evenings, especially after a hard or frustrating day, to remove that kind of constricted or negative energy.



This is simply the series of deities that one is introduced to when going through the preliminary practices of the Nyingma school of Tantric Buddhism, specifically the lineage called Longchen Nyingthik. After these practices are completed, the practitioner begins practicing with different forms of Padmasambhava, the personification of the masculine, the Guru. Also of equal importance is Vajrayogini, although in different forms, as well as a third deity that the practitioners themselves engage with. This form usually fits in somehow with their life and personality. These are the central stages of

practice, called the three roots.

## We

In the We section, it is prudent to look at how the images relate to group and interpersonal functioning. The main practice for yogis who have completed the preliminary practices are feasting and the yoga of inner heat, often involving sexual activity with a partner. These are higher yoga's, and are usually only practiced by a select few that have gone through the challenging preliminary practices.

## Skillful Means: Group Practice

### *Feasting*

Feast practices have been around since at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century, C.E. and were practiced by initiated meditation adepts who aimed at liberation through viewing themselves and each other as deities within a mandala. During the ritual, they would visualize, chant, and eat and drink substances often considered taboo, as well as engage in substance use, like alcohol and sometimes other drugs, which were

often considered unethical by traditional Indian society. The feast was a way to bring the idealized worlds of the mandala into a concrete reality and allow the community to validate and support enlightened experiences and realizations.

### **Union**

A great majority of the deities of Tantric Buddhism are portrayed in sexual embrace, which is a powerful message as to the power of sexual activity to catapult one's spiritual growth. While the practices of sexual yoga are not taught widely in Tantric Buddhism, they are a central aspect of many of the paths of the yogic adepts, and mastery over this is considered central to the realization of bliss and freedom from desire.

### **Transmission of wisdom**

A piece of Buddhist art is not considered done until it is filled with sacred relics and then sealed, or marked by the three letters for the chakras of the heart, throat, and head. This is because the main goal of the art is not simply to please, but to liberate, and the sealing of the art is a way to invite that sacred energy into the art itself and imbue it with power. On paintings or statues, the eyes are left to be done by someone who is qualified to be handling the energy of the paintings and statues, someone who has permission to invite the deity into incarnation.

### **I**

An integral tour of the sacred art of Tantric Buddhism would not be complete without a simple look into what the goals of these practices are, what they are getting after. The mind of enlightenment is the goal, with its ineffability and unboundedness, limitless compassion and omnipotence. The images and statues are not necessarily some idealized structure, rather they can be seen as mirrors that reflect back those deeper parts of ourselves that are limitless in their compassion and wisdom.

## **References**

Wilber, K. (1995). *Sex, Ecology, & Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*. Boston: Shambhala.

