

# TARA: A MANIFESTATION OF THE DIVINE FEMININE

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TARA, THE SAVIORESS, "she who ferries beings across the ocean of samsara" is the most beloved by the Tibetans of all the female goddesses. Her praises are sung and Tara is supplicated in all Tibetan monasteries and by many lay people as well. Tara is renowned for her swift and compassionate activity. Whether devotees to Tara have worldly or spiritual motivation, Tara gives benefit to all, and leads people to awakening. The Tibetans call her Jetsun Drolma. Drolma is the Tibetan for the Sanskrit word Tara. Je means the power to liberate others; tsun means that she benefits herself and all others, that she is beyond samsara and that she has the stainless wisdom body. In other words, Tara is fully enlightened; she is inseparable with the absolute true nature, the dharmakaya. She is the field through which the six perfections manifest; the compassionate play of the unmanifest and the manifest. She rushes to the aid of beings when we call upon her with heartfelt devotion. When hundreds of thousands of Tibetans were forced to flee their homeland, Tara was the one many chose to take refuge in. She is the essence of all the sources of refuge. Her mind is the mind of the Buddha's and lama's; her speech is the dharma; her body is the noble sangha; her qualities are the protectors; her activity is the dakinis.

The word "goddess" or "deity" is not an accurate rendering of what Tara really is. In Tibetan Tara is called a yidam. Yidams represent the inseparability of emptiness and clarity, emptiness and luminosity, emptiness and compassion. They are expressions of the dynamic nature of absolute reality. Absolute truth refers to the true nature of mind and reality which is empty and yet aware, luminous clarity. Tara is not separate from our own true nature, but until the time when this is actually fully realized, Tara appears as separate from ourselves. In order to accomplish complete liberation, yidam practice can be very beneficial. In Tibetan language, yi means mind and dam means covenant or vow. Yidam means that awakened aspect with which we unite our mind in order to fully realize the two benefits: the benefit for ourselves- the dharmakaya, the awakened formless body; the benefit for others- the awakened form body.

Tara is also known as "the Mother of all the Buddhas." This is because she is a form manifestation of the prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom, the realization of emptiness, and as such she is what gives birth to all the Buddhas.

In Western culture we lack female archetypes that embody the complete range of our potential qualities. In Buddhism we see embodiments of all aspects of pure form. Tara is both peaceful and wrathful, beautiful and powerful, the actuality of wisdom and sensuality, compassionate and sexual, empty and yet fully manifest. In this way she transcends dualistic limitations. Meditating on Tara helps to awaken our Buddha nature as well as the qualities of our Buddha nature. Tara leads us beyond duality to the infinite bliss and emptiness that is our most precious opportunity.

There are many forms of Tara, which embody her various aspects. The two primary forms of Tara are the green and the white. Tara's qualities are symbolized by her characteristics. Some of the attributes common to both Green and White Tara are: her ornaments symbolizing mastery of the six perfections; her crown of the five jewels showing that she is the embodiment of the five Buddha families: mirror-like wisdom, equanimity, discriminating wisdom, all accomplishing activity, and all pervading wisdom. Tara shines like a "thousand stars together" which indicates the limitless luminosity that emanates from her. Green Tara is described as being the color of melted snow in a high mountain lake- turquoise green. Her

green color is indicative of the Buddha family she belongs to- that of Amoghasiddhi, her consort, the Buddha of all-accomplishing activity. Her specialty is to remove difficulties, danger, obscurations, and fear and to transmit the blessing of perfect wisdom. In an outer sense Tara removes all obstacles; in an inner sense she removes negative imprints and habitual patterns. Her right arm is a sign of divine compassion, and her right hand is in the mudra of boundless generosity, signifying that she bestows both the ordinary accomplishments (supernatural powers), and the extraordinary accomplishment (realization of the absolute true nature). Her left arm symbolizes full and complete realization, and her left hand is in the mudra of giving refuge, with the thumb and ring finger joined showing the union of skilful means and wisdom. Her left hand also holds the stem of a rare lotus flower, symbolizing the dharma and its flower, which like a lotus is rooted in the mud of the samsara and which, when practiced, grows into the perfect blossom of full awakening. Green Tara's left leg is in half lotus posture indicating that she has gone beyond conflicting emotions; her right leg is outstretched like she is ready to jump off her cushion symbolizing that she is ready to rush to the aid of beings. Both legs together signify that although she is fully enlightened, she remains in samsara in order to benefit beings.

The other main form of Tara is the white Tara, called Drolkar in Tibetan. Drolkar's special activity is to bless her devotees with long life, transcendent wisdom, and progress in spiritual attainment. Her white color refers to the absence of conflicting emotions and dualistic concepts. Her seven eyes indicate that she sees reality through the three doors of liberation (realization of emptiness, the absence of characteristics, and the absence of wishes) and generates compassion as the four immeasurables of the bodhisattvas (love, compassion, joy, and equanimity).

In order for Tara to be able to benefit us, we need to approach her with an open heart and mind. Through continued meditation practice on Tara, we are able to establish a relationship with her in which we are able to trust and rely on her. It is like getting to know a friend- we have to invite them over to our home many times until we get to know them. The more we are able to open to her, the more she is able to benefit us. Her seed syllable is like her phone number and reciting her mantra Om Tare Tu Tare Ture Soha and visualizing her, imaging her, is like being at her house.

In Vajrayana, the tantric Buddhist tradition from which the Tara teachings and practices have come, in order to meditate on a yidam we need three transmissions: first we must receive an empowerment (Tibetan: wong) into the practice, from a qualified lineage holder. Following this we must receive the oral authorization to recite the text, and thirdly we need to have teachings on how to actually do the meditation practice. In the case of Tara practice, it is allowed by masters of my lineage, the Karma and Shangpa Kagyu, to learn and do the practice without the empowerment if it is not available at the time, and if we do take the empowerment as soon as we are able to. In this way, we can begin to mediate and call upon Tara even if we are not able to be initiated until a later time.

All Vajrayana practice has its basis in non-duality, and ideally is done concurrently with an awareness of emptiness. However, because we still are in the experience of being a separate self, (the dualistic experience of self and other), Vajrayana makes use of our dualistic habit in order to transform and awaken us. In relative reality, the truth of cause and effect on the level of phenomena affects us profoundly. When things go our way, we are happy, when we lose that which we love, we are unhappy, when we get that which we don't want, we are unhappy. We don't experience the arising of phenomena as co-emergent bliss and emptiness. We experience enlightenment as outside ourselves. We don't experience ourselves as the Buddha, as a fully liberated one. Therefore, in Vajrayana practice, we can call upon an awakened one, in this case, Tara, and supplicate her with devotion.

Devotion to a yidam, seen as inseparable with our root lama, opens our heart and mind to the experience of our own innate pure nature. Tara does not need our devotion, but through devotion to her, we can experience pure reflection through her and come to know our own Buddha nature. On top of this, Tara is real and can transmit blessing to us when called upon. Many times I have heard Westerners ask a Tibetan Rinpoche, "are the deities real or are

they archetypes?" Every time the master has answered that the yidams, the dakinis, the protectors are "as real as we are." Just as we exist so do they exist. On an ultimate level all phenomena is an illusion, but within the play of illusion there is pure manifestation of awakened mind and obscured manifestation of unawakened mind. When beings awaken they do not vanish into the void. Their capacity to benefit becomes infinite and vast. This is the basis of the Mahayana path: that we vow to become liberated in order that actual lasting benefit may manifest for ourselves and others: complete severing of the root of suffering. The activity of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and the yidams is through the dharma, through the teachings of truth as it is, to help us transform our habitual negative tendencies and realize the nature of mind and reality. In that Tara is actually as real as we are, and much, much more than us in that she is awakened, we can call upon her for transmission, for blessing, for purification, for help.

Tara's compassionate activity does not limit itself to spiritual benefit. There are many stories of her assisting people with worldly affairs as well and through this helping to turn the person to the dharma. In meditating on Tara and praying to her we can talk to her like a best friend, we can pour out our hearts to her, we can cultivate a relationship with the divine feminine, the Divine Mother, and receive all the benefits that this implies.