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Dance of the Yogini: Images of Aggression in Tantric Buddhism

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Dance of the Yogini: Images of Aggression in Tantric Buddhism

Article of the Month - September 2002

The Tibetan word 'lama' invariably conjures up a masculine image. A detailed consideration of its etymology however, paints a different and ironical picture. The first syllable 'la' means superior, while the second 'ma' is the word for mother and as a suffix denotes the feminine nature of a word in the Tibetan language. Practitioners confirm that the 'ma' in lama refers to the mother, and that the explanation for this title is that the lama is viewed as the highest form of motherhood. In the universally acknowledged Tibetan-English dictionary by Chandra Das, the word lama is literally interpreted as 'soul mother,' or the all-sustaining mother of the universe, a Tibetan saying quoted in the same place states that "previous to the lama, even the name of the Buddha did not exist."

If anything this small detail makes us aware of the extreme significance Buddhist thought places on the feminine. This is in contrast to the popular imagination, which emphasizes the dominance of the male element, pointing as evidence to the preponderance of male icons in the Buddhist pantheon. Undoubtedly, the bulk of Buddhist art consists of typically masculine imagery, and that too of a serene and calm kind. But different from this general iconographical attribute, there exist a genre of important goddesses who display a violent dynamism rarely visible elsewhere in Buddhist aesthetics. In universal parlance they are referred to as Dakinis or Yoginis, and encompass a dazzling array of female imagery.

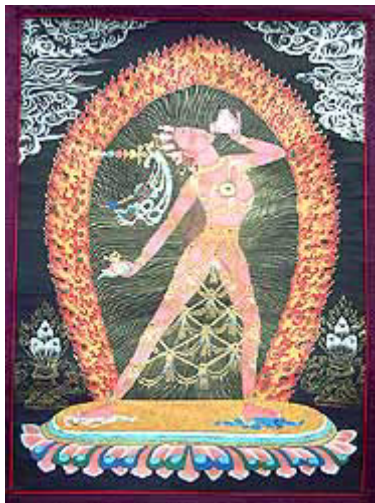


The word dakini is translated as women who dance in the sky or interpretable as women who revel in the freedom of emptiness. Hence invariably their bodies are depicted curved in sinuous dance poses.

Iconographic representations tend to show the dakini as a young, naked figure in a dancing posture, often holding a skull cup filled with menstrual blood or the elixir of life in one hand, and a curved knife in the other. She may wear a garland of human skulls, with a trident staff leaning against her shoulder. Her hair is usually wild and hanging down her back, and her face often wrathful in expression, as she dances on top of a corpse, which represents her complete mastery over ego and ignorance. Practitioners often claim to hear the clacking of her bone adornments as the dakinis indulge in their vigorous movement. Indeed these unrestrained damsels appear to revel in freedom of every kind.



Contemplation of the dakini icon makes one conscious that their essential trait is dynamism. As with all Buddhist imagery this too has to be interpreted in an allegorical manner. The vigorous restlessness of the dakini is nothing but the cyclical and rhythmic vibrancy of Mother Nature herself. According to Iris Stewart, noted scholar of feminine spirituality "The rhythms that make up a woman's body are the same rhythms that make up the dance of the Universe; when we feel the two as one, we know we are a part of nature." As the seasons change, as the cosmos vibrates with resounding resonance, giving rise to the energetic and active intensity that characterizes the harmonies making up our existence, so does a woman, the quintessential microcosm of the creative aspect of the universe, rejuvenate herself through her monthly cycle of periods.



It is in the same context that the dakini carries in her hands the skull cup full of menstrual fluids. Often this cup is raised to the level of her mouth, as if she intends to partake it.

This realization shocks us into the awareness of the severity of the dakini's message, namely that of negating the archaic customs which deem this female fluid as polluting and taboo. The curved knife she holds in the other hand is for annihilating these very restrictive customs. What should be an eternal reminder of the identification of the feminine with the divine, through bodily processes which are but natural to her, have been relegated to a degraded status. Thus the wrath of this primordial female figure must be grasped and understood not as a retribution which inspires fear and submission, but as a powerful and constructive force, a facilitator for change and understanding.

Buddhism is a positive religion, if ever there was one. Though the graphic symbolism of the dakini jolts us into a comprehension of the spiritual superiority of women, nevertheless an important element of dakini iconography subtly reminds us of the presence of the masculine in her composite buildup. The tantric shaft, known in Tibetan as the khatvanga, which she very conveniently tucks under one of her arms, is a symbol of masculinity.



Thus the message is brought across that nature is complete when male and female essences co-exist, each is incomplete without the other. None of the two is an island. An existence striving to live in resonance with the harmonies of nature must accept this fact, and bring about the necessary transformations required, if they do not already exist, to achieve this wholeness.

The preferred language of Tantric Buddhist scriptures is either Sanskrit or Tibetan, both well known and accessible. A particular class of texts said to have emanated from the dakinis were however guarded with great secrecy. Written warnings on the texts ensured that access to these kinds of teachings should be limited only to those able to understand their meaning and to maintain the required degree of discretion concerning their contents. In fact, texts said to have been revealed by dakinis, were believed to be written in the 'dakini spirit,' a kind of secret language, and these texts highly prized for their esoteric nature.

This language was referred to as the twilight language. Now twilight is a threshold symbol, the ambivalent region between one state and another. Thus we can be sure that associating such a language with the dakinis was done with a deeper motive. A majority of scholars believe that the use of such a mystical and secret language is parallel to the identification of women with the unknown in nature, and her body as a metaphor for the mysteries of the world. They see woman as the vessel of primary creative and spiritual powers. For the revelation of this enigma man must 'penetrate' into its innermost essence. In other words, read the truth written on the female body.

A profound application of these principles is found in the texts written in the twilight language and consisting of only a single syllable. Such texts could be grasped by practitioners only through the good offices of a guru trained in the lineage of that particular tradition. The secret of the text was transferred from the guru's mouth to the disciple's ear. Essentially, the notion was of a symbolic language, whose musical sound could not only be heard mystically by advanced meditators, but whose elaborate meaning could be condensed into a single and mystical hieroglyph. The Guru himself was believed to have received the sacred texts through the whispered voices of the dakini, known popularly as the Dakini's warm breath.

The question here remains of the nature of this mysterious and sacred language. The whole concept of a kind of language which is associated in this way with the sacred feminine, and which

is both symbolic and indecipherable in conventional terms is open to a number of interpretations. A logical and coherent initiative is that of scholar June Campbell who suggests that this language is one which a child experiences inside the womb. Modern research has shown that sound, and especially the mother's voice, plays a very important part in the development of a child. There is a link too between the experience of sound which the baby has, not only in the womb, but also in its first year of life, through the closeness to the mother's actual heart, where the sound of the heartbeat is reminiscent of the sound of the drum, an instrument closely associated with the dakini. Campbell at the same place asserts that beyond our individual experience as men and women, there exists a unitary experience of humanity which does not take into account sexuality. We are in this primordial state while we float in the mother's womb, and it is only after our psychic separation from the mother are we initiated into the world of duality. This state in other words is the twilight state.

Indeed the actual physiology of a woman's body allows for a very real kind of invasion of her distinct physical boundaries, or the penetration of her mysteries, through intercourse, pregnancy and breast-feeding. These three physical functions give a woman a unique experience of the paradoxical relationship between subject and object. Through these three archetypal acts of intimacy she dissolves the very dualities of object and subject. Two lovers engaged in the ultimate union or the mother tending to her child are the ultimate acts of fusion. Similar is the question of her secret language often composed of only a single syllable as mentioned above. In this language there exists no duality. Linguistic duality is essentially composed of word and its meaning. By restricting her sacred language to a single syllable the dakini annihilates with one quick masterstroke the whole ambiguity inherent in conventional languages. This is similar to the dissertation which suggests that the first alphabet of the Rig Veda, the world's most ancient text, contains within itself the combined spirituality of the whole corpus of Vedic literature.



The language of the dakinis help us escape the paralyzing discourse of dualities, and recognize the fundamental principle of the unity of all entities. In this manner does the dakini makes us relate to her physical presence, through a grounding in her bodily functions, which serve to annihilate boundaries and elude the ordinary constraints of gender. This is why she often carries the tantric shaft with her. Though she is female, her femininity is definable only in relation to the male, as his masculinity is prescribable only in her context.

Having enlightened us thus the dakini nevertheless continues her vigorous dance in the void or emptiness characterized by the sky. While doing so her hands spread out, engaged in various incessant and peppy dance gestures. Doing so she maps out her own space and domain, and carves out her own sacred mandala.

Thus asserting that though she confirms her identification with the male of the species she is not be taken for granted nor imposed upon, the blazing fires behind her ever ready to consume the enemies of the Dharma.

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