

A Brief Instruction on Tara

In general, when you hear the history of a deity, inspiration arises within your mind. For example, when you hear the life story of a master such as Milarepa, you feel inspired. It makes you recall their qualities, and then faith arises. When trusting faith arises, the blessings will enter your mind.

First, you learn about the deity's qualities, the purpose and what the fruition of practicing that deity will be. When you practice a deity, your mind begins to open up. So first, you familiarize yourself with the qualities of the deity: the qualities of omniscience, loving compassion, and the capacity to grant protection. Then you can understand that, if you practice the deity properly, these results can be attained. This is how to begin to practice according to the practice-blessing lineage.

In the beginning of any path of practice—such as the path of Individual Liberation, the Bodhisattva path, or the Vajrayana path—it is very important to familiarize yourself with the history first. Therefore, if you wish to practice Tara, this is also where you should begin. Or to begin practicing Guru Yoga, for instance, you could read Milarepa's life story; hearing about his story will make faith, and then trust, arise.

All the practices that exist have a lot of good qualities, but because we are obscured by ignorance, it is hard for us to develop faith right away. This is why it is so important to know the history of the specific deity you are going to practice.

In general, Tara is said to be the “Mother of all Buddhas,” without exception. In reality, she is the great *dharmakāya* mother, the mother of all buddhas and sentient beings. On the relative level—where we perceive a dualistic existence, where there seems to be a difference between buddhas and sentient beings—she is the ground from which all the buddhas arise in order to connect to sentient beings. For example, in this world and age, Tara has appeared as Māyadevi, Buddha Shākyamuni's mother. She came here to this human world to give birth to the Buddha, and a week after the Buddha was born, she passed away. Tara also appears in myriads of other forms, and in each of those manifestations she has a different name and history.

There are six million Tara tantras, and many of them say that eons ago, Tara was the first and only deity that was practiced. There are countless stories of those who attained enlightenment only through the practice of Tara. Her story is told in *Tara's Great Deliverance Tantra*, and there are other accounts of her story and qualities in the collection of words of the Buddha—the Kangyur. There are a few accounts about the origin of Tara, but according to the story of Tara as

a person that attained enlightenment, she was born many eons ago, in a different world system, as a princess called Yeshe Dawa, the daughter of the powerful king Mutik Ngari Gyalpo.

When she was born, she was already a bodhisattva; she had great love and compassion for all sentient beings. The spiritual authorities of that time suggested that because her attainment was so high, she should pray to be reborn as a male in future lives, and so progress towards enlightenment. She refused, pointing out that many buddhas had already manifested in male bodies, and so she vowed to attain enlightenment as a woman, and to continuously return in a female body to benefit beings for as long as samsara exists.

In general, before a buddha attains enlightenment, he or she proclaims certain words of commitment regarding how they are going to benefit sentient beings. Tara said to Chenrezig, “Fear not! I will protect all beings! I will ferry all beings across the terrifying ocean of samsaric existence.” She will be there to protect anyone who, dwelling in samsara and tormented by suffering, supplicates and practices her. This is Tara's pledge to benefit sentient beings. Beneath the Tara statue in our stupa in Arizona, her words of commitment are written.

There are relative and ultimate levels, and on the relative level, Tara appeared in this world to accomplish the benefit of sentient beings. In this eon, she first appeared as Buddha Shākyamuni's mother, Māyadevi.

Later, Tara also appeared as Yeshe Tsogyal, the spiritual consort of Guru Rinpoche, when he was spreading the Secret Mantra Vajrayana teachings in Tibet. It is also said that Guru Rinpoche was an emanation of Buddha Shākyamuni, appearing to tame the sentient beings of the degenerate age, when their afflictive emotions are very powerful and it is difficult to tame them through the Vinaya teachings alone. It was said that the teachings of the Vajrayana would be very powerful in times of degeneration. The Vajrayana is a path where the afflictive emotions are not abandoned, but rather, taken as the path. Yeshe Tsogyal helped Guru Rinpoche compile his profound teachings and then hide them as *termas*, or spiritual treasures. After Guru Rinpoche had passed into nirvana, she introduced those treasure teachings to the future treasure discoverers, the *tertöns*. Yeshe Tsogyal's story is a long one, but in brief, she is said to have attained a rainbow-like body of immortality. Without leaving behind a mortal body, she transformed into a rainbow body and continued to abide within that state. At that time she became known as Machik Drubpai Gyalmo, a deathless dakini. In general, when we explain these histories from a human perspective, people often have some doubts whether these things really happened. But it seems that everyone agrees that she attained the state of immortality and became the deathless dakini Machik Drubpai Gyalmo, who also is an emanation of Tara.

When Chenrezig appeared as Lord Buddha's bodhisattva disciple, the Buddha made a prophecy that in the future Chenrezig would tame "the red-faced barbarians who eat meat and lack compassion in the land to the North." Eons before that, the White and Green Taras made aspirations to always appear together with Chenrezig, to assist in his endeavors. This story comes from the perspective of the *dharmakaya* and *sambhogakaya*, where, many eons in the past, Tara promised Chenrezig to act as his helper. At that time, Chenrezig had become deeply discouraged by samsara and cried. The White and Green Taras appeared from his tears and promised to assist him in benefitting sentient beings. Then later, Buddha Shakyamuni instructed Chenrezig to tame the Tibetan people. Due to the samaya between Tara and Chenrezig, and due to the Buddha's command, Tara appeared together with Chenrezig in Tibet.

First, at the time of the Dharma King Songtsen Gampo, Tara appeared as the Chinese and Nepali queens, the wives of the king. Historically, we know that they actually appeared because they brought the two precious Jowo statues to Tibet. These statues, which are like the crown jewels of Tibet, can still be seen today; so it is a true story.

The masters of old India and many great panditas have relied on Tara as their main yidam practice. For example, before Atisha went to Tibet, he crossed the ocean on a boat to meet his guru Serlingpa. When a storm broke out and his boat almost sank, Atisha supplicated Tara and she appeared to him instantly, together with a vast retinue to come to his aid. Tara saved the boat and helped Atisha reach the shore safely so he was able to meet Serlingpa without any other hindrances. There is now a thangka image of Tara as she appeared to Atisha at that time. This image is said to have spoken to Atisha directly, just like one person talking to another person. Also, there are many stories of how Tara spoke to Atisha directly and made various prophecies when he was later in Tibet. There are also many stories of other practitioners to whom this image is said to have spoken directly.

There are many stories about many different Tibetan lamas who have met Tara directly, and to whom Tara has spoken directly. For example, Sogyal Rinpoche has been distributing an image of Tara that actually spoke to many lamas; this image of Tara spoke directly to the Tertön Chokling, Jamyang Khyentse, Kongtrul Rinpoche, and so forth. Not only has she appeared to high lamas, she has also appeared to ordinary people. In Tibet, there are many real stories about how Tara appeared to lay people who supplicated her, and whom she then protected from various types of dangers, such as tigers, or bandits and robbers, and so forth. There would be no end to telling all those stories.

But to give one example: When Jamgön Kongtrul met with obstacles to his lifespan, his lama told him to practice White Tara. He did a Tara retreat for six months, and during the entire retreat he had no special signs of accomplishment, not even a dream. By the end of his retreat, he had become tired of practice and he felt that there was no real benefit in his practice of Tara, so he left the retreat and went to circumambulate a holy place. Along that path he met a girl who offered him a bunch of flowers to offer at the temple. At that time he didn't think that it was anything special; he just thought that a girl gave him flowers to offer to the temple, so he took the flowers and went to the temple. When he arrived, he examined the flowers more closely, and counted them. It turned out that there were exactly a hundred and eight flowers, which he thought was really strange. That girl was not just any girl, she was really an emanation of Tara. Then it turned out that his lifespan extended to exactly a hundred and eight years. When he realized that that girl was really Tara, true devotion finally arose in him.

As for Tara's connection to the Drikung Kagyu lineage: In the Drikung Kagyu lineage she appeared as Achi Chökyi Drölma, who has her own life story. Achi's three names (Achi, Chökyi, and Drölma) weren't given when she was born, but she acquired them gradually. When Achi was born, numerous auspicious signs, such as flowers, parasols, and rainbows, appeared in the sky. This is why her birthplace is still known as Kyetrag Thang (Plain of Joy).

As a small child, she was always reciting the mantra of Tara. This is why she was given the name Tara (Drölma means "Tara"). So Tara was her first name, which is the third one in Achi Chökyi Drölma. Later, when she grew up, she began to teach the Dharma, telling people about karma, and love and compassion. This is why another name was added, and she became known as Chökyi Drölma, which means "Dharma Tara."

She overcame a lot of difficulties and went through a lot of hardships throughout her life. As an adult, she traveled to Kham in Eastern Tibet, and arrived at a place called Kyura Drak. Kyura is the name of a family lineage in Tibet that was semi-divine: half from the god realm and half from the human world. This line was close to becoming extinct, and in order for that not to happen, she formed a liaison with a descendant of that noble Kyura clan, and gave birth to four sons. Of her sons, Pekar Wangyal also fathered four sons, one of whom, Naljor Dorje, became Lord Jigten Sumgön's father. Jigten Sumgön was a great being whose activities equaled the Buddha's. He is said to have had a vast assembly of a million and two hundred thousand disciples. In any case, this was how she got the last of her three names, Achi, which means "great-grandmother"; she was Jigten Sumgön's great-grandmother. Thus, she finally had three names, Achi Chökyi Drölma.

Achi attained the rainbow body and departed, with her horse and a small dog, from this world to the dakini pure land without leaving her mortal body behind. They all left a footprint that can still be seen today on the rocks in Kyura Drak in Kham, Tibet. Many of the elder lamas know about the Rainbow Body Cave—the cave from which she departed.

Achi also composed her own sadhana, which is quite extensive. In it she says, “In the future, when the Buddha’s teachings encounter difficulties—when there are difficulties in upholding, sustaining, and increasing the Buddha’s teachings—you should supplicate me.” The sadhana she wrote is a unique scripture. Without a great master’s explanation, it is close to impossible for anyone to fully understand it. It is very difficult to make sense of, as the letters in which she wrote are rather cryptic. It’s not like an ordinary book that follows a definite structure; there isn’t even a basic structure, such as numbered pages. There’s nothing like that, so it seems to be completely disorganized, without any kind of order, almost a bit random. So it’s a very unusual and strange kind of text.

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