

An Introduction to the Bodhisattva-Divinity Tara

In order for us as Westerners to engage in practices that have come from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, without misunderstanding their nature or purpose, there are a few ideas that need to be spelled out. As Americans, we have certain common ideas, and so the same questions naturally arise, and these can be addressed at any point, but probably the earlier on in our study the better.

I would like to introduce Tara as an example of a practice that can be beneficial, and, when I think of doing this, I can see right away the kinds of questions I would propose we consider so the communication can have a better chance of success.

First, as with any divine being – or bodhisattva, we have the question, ‘Who is Tara?’ Of course we can see that there are different ways to answer this kind of a question. There are different levels to it. When we speak about the ultimate nature of anything, be it God, or Buddha, then this is a really deep question, maybe taking a lifetime to ask or to answer. If we are asking this type of deep question, this holds up a mirror to our own self. We can ask, ‘Who am I?’, and ‘Who do I conceive myself to be?’

Then again, especially if we are beginners, we really need more of an answer in terms of what we can all easily recognize and understand and work with. Maybe this approach will be helpful: using the simplest, least esoteric language to describe something that is both accessible and also profound.

Historically, and now in Western culture too, Tara is regarded as a protectress, a savior, a benefactor. The practice of calling on Tara in times of need has been successful for many people. She is called on

to help liberate us from problems, and especially from fears. She has a reputation for quick action, for responding very quickly, with loving kindness and compassion.

Her practice can be done in different ways - with prayer, or through visualization and mantra recitation. Tara's mantra is Om Tare Tuttare Ture Soha (pronounced Om Tah-ray Too-tah-ray Too-ray So-ha). A person can also simply think of her and feel her presence with faith and devotion.

Meditators will tell us that we all have Tara within us; that all these qualities and wonders are contained within our fundamental nature. They tell us that if we do the practice these qualities awaken and are expressed in the world, and that in a sense we become Tara, and this I don't doubt. For the time being though, let's just stay with the outer, common belief and function, that calling on Tara works, that increasing what we can call *the Tara energy* in our lives works, even if we don't know all of why or how it does. If we have some karmic affinity, and some receptivity or openness, and we give these methods a fair try, we can see the result for ourselves.

'If I could only give you the moon...'

Another question that often comes up when talking about any of the bodhisattva-deity practices, calling on Tara for example, and praying for a husband or a wife, or for health, or wealth is, 'How is this Buddhist?', and I think I'm just now able to say what I've been thinking and feeling for a while now that Tara is of a certain class I call 'the Bodhisattva Sangha'. The word bodhisattva means someone who is dedicated to helping others in the fullest possible ways, and sangha means a spiritual community.

As a member of the Bodhisattva Sangha, Tara responds as we would, with kindness, to someone asking for something... If they ask for water, we give them water; if they ask for a coat, we give them a coat...

There's a Zen story about a monk who was told that a thief was coming, and so he threw his bowl and his robes out the window as the thief approached. The thief scooped them up, somewhat startled, I'd imagine, and the monk called after him, saying, 'If I could only give you the moon!...'

Such is the wish of Bodhisattva Sangha – their deep wish is for our true happiness, our freedom, peace and health, and so if we ask for food or shelter or medicine, they give us these without holding anything back, as a mother or father would give to their child, or a friend to a friend. They give out of their great means. They will give to us according to our needs, and they will give to us as much as we can receive. Their wish for us includes both the relative, provisional, day to day needs, and also those things that are of ultimate benefit, such as teachings and encouragement, and good conditions for spiritual growth. Their love and their kind wish for us is of one nature.

I heard someone give the definition of blessing, in the Buddhist sense, as that which removes obstacles to spiritual practice, which I think is a good definition because it includes both relative and ultimate things.

Making a distinction – the word 'deity'

If I had to choose one term that isn't translated well from Eastern culture to Western culture, it is the word 'deity'. More often than not, translators are not communicating the intended meaning. The reason

is this: whether or not we identify with the Western religious traditions, as Westerners we have ideas about God as part of our culture. We have all these associations, automatically, for the word God and its synonyms that, in this case does not apply. When trying to understand what words are referring to that come from non-theistic cultures, some effort is needed to get at a clear sense of their meaning.

We can say for certain that Buddhism does not make use of the idea of a creator God, all powerful, and all knowing. It does however have teachings, and it does make use of practices that call upon and access what can be called 'help from the other side'. There is calling upon beings that help.

When Tibetan teachers speak in English, sometimes they don't translate the word 'yi-dam', and they explain it as keeping the bodhisattva – divinity 'held tightly in the mind', as a method of meditation, as a path, and as a means of benefit.

A first level bodhisattva, in some teachings, is described as having at least the experience of insight into the cause of the end of suffering, that freedom and joy. And Buddhist teachings on what is called refuge tell us that if someone or some being is still subject to suffering or change, then that is not a reliable source of protection in the long term. We should seek true refuge, true and lasting protection and support. This, in Buddhist teachings, is what distinguishes Buddhas, or enlightened beings as true refuge.

Perhaps, rather than use the word 'deity', sticky, or perhaps misleading as it is, I would propose the term 'divinity' – since we do have the idea that the sacred can be here in this world; that it is here for us, available, and to be received with deep respect. The sense of divinity can be cultivated and awakened throughout our lives.

One more thought: regarding a question such as 'Where is Tara?' We usually divide the world up in our thinking in ways it is not actually divided. We say there is an inside and an outside to our life. Looked at energetically though, the so-called inside and outside are one.

If we think of Tara as an archetype, an aspect of the universal soul we all share, this can have connotations of being purely something inside. My sense is that it's truer to say that Tara, and the other Buddhas, Saints, or Bodhisattva Sangha exist in the realm of one-ness, where the inside and outside are both included, where they are one. I think this accounts, at least in part, for the effectiveness of these methods.

A note on the prayer that follows:

I usually don't comment on anything I write out that is more lyrical, since these sorts of things should speak for themselves, but in this case maybe it would add something to say the following.

I had the idea that describing a bodhisattva, or a guardian or benefactor can be likened to talking about a person. We may say the person has this quality, or likes to go here or there, or spend their time like this, all of which would be for the sake of trying to give us some idea of the person. All the different things we could say would be to introduce us to the essence of the person. So it is with this poem about Tara. The different aspects or qualities mentioned refer to something that is one essential nature – that is Tara. The purpose of writing this, and reflecting on it is to get in touch with what is being talked about.

One more thing may be worth mentioning. While much of this is very personal, I've been surprised to learn that others have had similar experiences with Tara. And so here I am writing this out this prayer and sharing it with others, with the hope that it brings others, my dear friends and family, the same, and greater, benefit.

In Praise of Tara

Holy Tara, Protector of living beings,
May your blessings flow throughout all of our lives
and by Your Compassionate Activity,
may all the myriad needs of all the myriad beings
be completely fulfilled

Tara

Your beauty tames the minds of living beings.
You draw all beings to yourself.
Your virtue calms their fears and brings them all fresh happiness.

You are the one who makes what seems to be the impossible entirely
possible
You conquer disbelief, and dispel doubt
without leaving even a trace
You are miraculous activity, beyond comprehension.

You are 'swift to regard', quick to respond,
the remover of obstacles.

You are our protector

You are grace and blessings,
the relative and ultimate liberator of beings

Your beauty inspires uprightness of moral character
You pacify habit energy
We shed our skins, lose our old ways,
like leaves falling off of trees

You bring new birth, and give new strength

You purify the mind - like the stream-clearing jewel
You uplift and brighten the mind

For those with positive aims,
You are their Great Benefactress

You set all things right
You bring about reconciliation without impediment
without anything blocking it
You bring harmony to every surrounding circumstance

You help us to gather all positive conditions
You bring out the best that is in us all
You make all practices effective
It has always been this way
It is this way now
It will always be this way

You are the spring-like feeling of 'yes',
the sum of all optimism,
joyful positive energy,
the feeling of 'I can'

Tara,
May your blessings completely illuminate all of our lives
and may all the myriad needs of all the myriad beings
be completely fulfilled now

O, Bright Virtue!
You are light
You are grace in my life
and subtle nourishment
The blessing of all the women who have ever wished me well

You are instinctive love,
all-accommodating
naturally inclusive
comprehensive

You are embodied enlightened intelligence,
intuitive awareness, the heart awake,
and the flourishing of joy

You are playful, youthful, joyful, quick, charming, elegant, inspiring,
wise, warm, strengthening, encouraging, healing,
calming, stabilizing;

How can I call you? Tara - hope, positive energy, joyful, pure,
wholesome energy

With your rivers
nurture my limbs, these fields
With your warmth, your light
bring about the total flowering of goodness...
Tara,
May your blessings be established in all of our lives

Because this is Divine Feminine energy, quick to respond
with magical activity,
the equivalent of the patron saint of lost causes,
grace,
spiritual beauty bringing light, giving hope,
removing obstacles,
calming fear, pacifying suffering,
and protecting
bringing harmony to every surrounding circumstance,
bringing life, health, happiness, good fortune, and stability

and, being the Spring-like sum of all optimism, inspiring,
positive energy,
enabling all the good things we would do to become effective,
to become fulfilled,
to become complete,
This is called Green Tara
May all share in these blessings...