



*"In your light I learn how to love.
In your beauty, how to make poems.*

*You dance inside my chest
where no one sees you,*

*but sometimes I do,
and that sight becomes this art."*

Rumi, *The Book of Love*



U.S. GAMES SYSTEMS, INC.

☾ Buddha Wisdom ☽
Shakti Power

GUIDEBOOK



BY LAURA SANTI

Buddha Wisdom *Shakti Power*



GUIDEBOOK



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*“Is not Impermanence the very
fragrance of our days?”¹*

-Rilke

Buddha Wisdom, Shakti Power contains a smattering of the diverse pantheon of Buddhist and Hindu deities, bodhisattvas, mandalas, demons and historical figures—the famous and the humble. It is a microcosm of the world at large, and a sort of “Buddhism 101,” with a little Hinduism for spice, from my thangka art painted over the last 15 years.

The imagery of thangka art is specific and codified. The imagery comes from what practitioners through the ages have seen and felt after entering into deep meditation states, and through intense visualization after learning the minutia of elaborate, detailed *puja*, or prayer practice. It is intriguing that this highly stylized and codified art form, however, is all about the ephemeralness of energy, human frailty in the face of emotion and thought, and the mystery of what it is to be human and alive one moment, and in the very next, gone.

The deities in this deck are all aspects of God, as if God were playing all the characters in a play about human nature and the nature of the universe. This is why, for example, the goddess Green Tara is always shown as sweet and smiling, sitting on a lotus, holding two blue flowers. Her form represents a specific energetic state. If we painted Green Tara as an elderly woman, she would be a different energetic state and not really a depiction of Green Tara.

In the end, all this polydynamic energy is sometimes given a title of the various names of "God." It is present in our minds, the universe at large, and in one drop of dew falling from a blade of grass. Our mind "sees" this energy through the prism of our human-ness; we attempt to make sense of what we experience and what comes to us in dreams and visions. And so the mind assigns animal and human form to the energetic beings and ghosts, deities and fields of energy summoned through prayer. These are their images.

—*Laura Santi*



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How to Use the Deck

“Stabilize your mind in the deep love and respect,
that is the substance of your life and of life itself.

For you

the world will cease to be a confusing, frustrating,
disappointing place.

It will become permeated with magic and mystery and miracles.”²

—*Swami Chetanananda*

You can use the deck in two different ways. The first is to hold the cards in your hands so that they can absorb your energy and the subtle vibrations of your thoughts and emotions. Then, spread the cards out on a table face up and look at them. Breathe in deeply a few times, allowing the exhale to come out as it wants to, slow and easy. Close your eyes for a moment. Sit quietly and feel your body, noticing if any part of you asks for your attention. Take your next breath into that place and try and release it on the exhale. On each exhale, allow yourself to relax a little deeper and let go. Let your arms dangle free at your sides, hands empty and soft. Look at the cards again. Simply allow

yourself to gaze at them without really focusing on any one for a moment. Your eyes are open, but not focusing outwardly just yet, much like when you are daydreaming. Relax your forehead and imagine the energy there and in your eyes, as it begins to flow down your face and neck and into your belly. Feel it gather there, and then imagine that it flows out of your navel and around your waist to your sides, up your sides to your armpits, and then down the underside of your arms, trickling off your fingertips.

If you want, some people find it helpful to raise their arms slightly away from the body. Sit for a few minutes imagining the energy flowing in this way. You might feel that it takes over and creates this flow itself, or you might find that you need to push a little at the idea of it. It still works, even if you can't quite feel it. You are doing a negative psychic release exercise as taught by Swami Rudrananda, the first American initiated into the Sarasvati branch of the Dashanami Sampradaya. When you are ready, let your hands move over the cards and pick the one that most appeals to you. Read its description and its message.

The other method is to keep the cards face down. After you have held them for awhile, thinking about your intention for the day or any question you have, begin to shuffle them, or spread them out on a table-top, still face down. Let your mind go easy and focus on your breath and the reason you are consulting the cards on this day. Pick a card and see what it has to offer, by feeling into the imagery, and reading about the deity or being it depicts.

Visual art hits the psyche deep within. Who knows why we might be drawn to a deity with a snarling angry face rather than a sweet smile? Keep in mind that all the deities of the Buddhist pantheon have only love on their minds. They might express it by being ferocious or by being sweet—but all they really offer us is love. Their imagery is born from the multitude of archetypal symbolism embedded in us, handed down through our ancestral lines, the society we were born in, and the myths of our cultures. All of it becomes a part of our very DNA. What was on your mother's mind as she carried you in her womb imparts a sentiment to you that goes deep within, as did her mother, and on and on back through time. You are a chord vibrating to the notions of your ancestors. We are in some respects programmed to be who we are.

This perspective may help you feel more accepting of your thoughts and emotions. Buddhism and Hinduism, and many other schools of thought, teach us that we all have a shadow side and a side that seeks the light. It is up to us to decide which side we focus on and nourish. To grow as a human being into something that we can feel good about requires attentiveness to our thoughts and actions and forgiveness for the fact that we are simply human. To paraphrase Swami Rudrananda, "Every human being deserves your respect, because the very act of living is a challenge and hard work." ³

May peace and happiness bloom inside your heart.

The Cards

1 · The Infant Ganesh

Remover of Obstacles



Ganesh is like that uncle who knows everyone and can introduce you to anyone. When practitioners want to work with a deity they always ask Ganesh for help beforehand, reciting his mantra and making offerings. He is sometimes portrayed as an infant, as in this image, very sweet, not at all like the powerful force that he is. He has many forms, as do most of the gods of the Buddhist and Hindu pantheons. But a few features are always the same: he has a large stomach showing his massiveness. He is a huge creature, and therefore good at removing obstacles. He represents the earth-level of existence, where eating and food are a part of life. His large head shows his relationship to the intellectual path of spiritual work. Elephants, although massive, are sensitive creatures, as capable of picking up a strawberry fallen onto the ground as pushing that illegally parked car from in front of your driveway. Call on Ganesh to remove obstacles in your life.

2 · Green Tara

The Bodhisattva of Compassion in Action

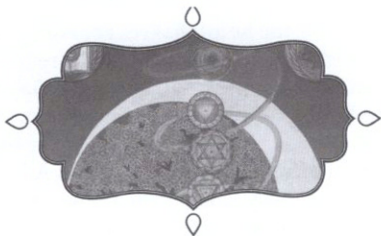


Green Tara glows with the energy of new spring green grass, potent with the awaking and growth of that season. She is exquisitely beautiful, smiling sweetly, radiant and yet ethereal and translucent, because she is no ordinary being. She is a *bodhisattva*, one who has dedicated herself to helping others. She appears to us as a young woman, at that time of life when anything feels possible and there is so much to do to make it so. She wears jewels and silk garments, as she is a princess in the pantheon of beings that come to us to help. She spontaneously gives aid and protection to all. Her compassion is available to anyone, no matter if it is a thief in the night, a woman giving birth or a worker trying hard to please. She knows that personality is just the outer shell that holds the purity of our own true Self within. She holds two blue lotuses that represent her purity and power. She sits on another lotus that arose out of the lake of tears shed by the Buddha of Compassion, Avalokitesvara. While he is quiet and still in his

compassion, Tara is compassion in action. She extends her foot down to the lotus below, ready to stand at a moment's notice to begin working.

Her right hand rests on her knee, open in the mudra of supreme giving. Her left hand, poised in front of her heart, forms the mudra of protection and fearlessness. Her mantra is "Om Tara Tuttare Ture Svaha," and you will hear it everywhere you go in Nepal and Tibet, as she is one of the most called-upon deities in Buddhism.

3 • *The Chakras* & the Four Guardian Angels



There are centers in the body where energy moves like quicksilver. They are the places where we can shift the energy state through touch, intention or physical movement. They are called *chakras*, meaning little vortex wheels, and they are also called acupuncture points. The grand river of our energy runs down the center front of the torso and up the back, crisscrossing front to back through the seven major chakras on the center line, and making them

turn like waterwheels. They are the crossroads of the highways of the psychic nervous system. Everyone has felt their chakras at one time or another but it is the awareness of that fact that is the first step in learning to govern your energy. For example, when you have to stand up and give a speech you may get a knot in your stomach; you are feeling the abdominal chakra. Having your heart broken creates a sensation of crushing or physical pain in the center of your chest; that is the heart chakra closing from feeling the loss of love. When you witness something special, like an amazing performance that strikes you to the core with wonder, your third eye, the spot between the eyebrows, might have a feeling of lightness.

The symbols for the body chakras are rising up amidst this tree of life. Four medallions representing the Christian guardian archangels Uriel, Gabriel, Michael and Raphael guard the energy system, standing at the four corners. These great angels have their counterpart in Buddhism—the *herukas*. All spiritual traditions alive today emerged at a time when people lived closer to the earth and were more aware of the subtle movements of energy, the beings in other dimensions, and the afterlife. Great archetypes have their counterpart in every culture.

This painting is an illustration for a spiritual psychic healer, Carrie Tolomei. She calls her work "Realizing your Potent Self." ⁴ Ms. Tolomei draws on her experience and what she sees around the chakra areas of her clients to help people grow and heal as individuals. She helps them become more aware of

the patterns and tendencies inherent in their belief systems and energy body that prohibit self-awareness and growth. The moon represents the shadow side that all people have. Ms. Tolomei's work acknowledges that we have this side, and teaches that it is not so much a negative as a helpful tool for self-reflection.

4 · *Parā the Ancient Tantric Mother Goddess*

Origin of all Goddesses



Parā nourishes the universe by pouring forth the nectar of life. She is the hidden energy, the luminous white light, the original creator, observer, and destroyer, presiding over the destruction and transformation of the universe. Her Sanskrit name means “supreme” as she is the highest manifestation of a goddess, and the ancient source of many other goddesses. Sarasvatī is her non-tantric equivalent.

Out of nothing, glowing in a dark grove of kadamba trees, she begins to appear. Dressed in spotless white linen and wearing many jewels made of pearl and crystal, her celestial beauty is so blinding that it is

difficult to look at her. Her face contains the radiance of a million stars and the moon rests in her crown. She holds the book of all wisdom and a crystal mala, a counterpart to the Christian rosary, for counting her mantras between thumb and index finger, held in the gesture of knowledge.

Parā bestows enlightenment, the defeat of death, and the granting of eloquence and knowledge. She is the very essence of wisdom. ⁵

5 . *The Red Dakini*

Who Dances in White Mahakala's Heart



The word dakini means “sky goer,” one who moves in the sky of wisdom, a place of infinite expansiveness. The great Indian saint Bagavan Nityananda once said *“The real sunrise is in the sky of the heart; it is the best one. Just as the water jar reflects the sun, so the entire universe shines in the heart-space of the Self. When you are in a train, the whole world appears to pass by. Similarly, the whole universe can be known within the Self.”* ⁶ A dakini sky-goer roams in the vastness of space to find you, but in the end, you find she is

already in your heart, whispering her message, as close to you as your breath.

This dakini resides in the heart of the fierce form of the god of compassion, White Mahakala, a wealth deity. The femininity of dakinis expresses potency, the fertility of possibility, the unimaginable possibilities that unfold through spiritual practice. She represents the fact that wisdom can come about spontaneously—just like that! The flickering luminous dance of the energy-dakini manifests in many forms, representing every aspect and level of female energy, from the little gremlin spirit that “misplaced” your keys, to the wise woman reading tarot cards with 35 years of studying human behavior. She may be the spiritual teacher who shows you the ways to the human heart. They range from beings with some level of spiritual power to fully realized beings. This dakini is an example of one of the higher forms. She is sweet and beautiful, and she flirts with us, mesmerizing us. She is what attracts the wealth to gather around Mahakala, and hence to the followers of the White Mahakala practice. She is like the wife behind a politician, or the woman behind the throne, her presence and influence is unseen but profound.

6 • Kubera

Patron of the Arts, Creator of Abundance



Kubera rides his horse through the twilight sky, guarding the north face of Mt. Meru, the center of the world. He is serious and somewhat wrathful and intent upon his job. He is dressed warmly to ward off the chill from the mountaintop. His mongoose spills jewels from its mouth and they scatter like twinkling stars. He is in Ratnasambhava's retinue, the Jewel Buddha family, and so his company gives you an abundance of wealth and beauty. He is one of many in his Buddha's charge, not of noble rank or elevated spiritual practice. In fact, he is one of eight demon generals in service to a middleman in the ranks, Vaishravana. He goes about his life as a day-to-day 'blue collar worker'—but he has powers that have made him very popular.

To conjure Kubera's aid one does puja to his magic square—a grid of nine numbers in an arrangement such that each line in the grid adds up to the same sum—72, for Kubera. The power of magic squares has been known about by all cultures for thousands

of years. Albrecht Dürer drew one in the corner of his etching “Melancholia,” they appear in the Egyptian pyramids and everywhere magic is harnessed for people’s work. Kubera’s horse carries his magic square in his breastplate.

Kubera helps people shift from a poverty mentality to a wealth mentality, not only of material things, but of time, helping us take the time to stop and appreciate life. Working with him helps the mind transform thought-forms, replacing destructive habits with habits that create prosperity. Because of his love of beauty he celebrates the earth’s effulgence, the beauty of nature, and he helps those working on behalf of the environment. He is a great patron of aesthetics and the arts, knowing that surrounding yourself with beauty refines your energetic mechanism. Kubera is an unusual figure in that his masculinity doesn’t show the fact that he is associated with a blending of male and female energies and contains them both.

<i>27</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>22</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>23</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>21</i>

7 · Kali Troma Nagmo's Mandala Mansion



Kali's mandala glows dark midnight blue, as Kali's color is blue-black. The outer edge is a ring of fire, and inside that is a fence providing protection from any who would enter unprepared or without the right motivation. Passing through these levels you approach a lotus, born in the muck beneath the water and rising up into the purity of the sky. It has bloomed from her heart and invites you in. The syllables *Ha Ri Ni Sa*, part of her mantra, slowly appear on the petals, glowing and then burning and shining brighter and brighter. Their light invites the nectar of wisdom from the hearts of all Buddhas to dissolve within you, mixing together to become a great ocean of wisdom.

Kali, or Troma Nagmo in Tibetan, is the Great Wrathful Mother of compassion. Her intensity burns through the fabric of duality, the illusion of this and that, right and wrong, God separate from me. She is the main deity in the Vajrayana Pacification of Suffering practice called *Chöd*. It is traditionally done in cremation grounds and places that bring us

face to face with fear so we learn to cut through the obstacles of tension, doubts and fears, the obstacles that deny us access to joy.

Chöd is ancient, one of the earliest Vajrayana sadhanas. "...It is a practice of self-sacrifice. Doing Chöd starts with visualizing making an offering of our most valuable possession, our body, and transforming it into a magical nectar as a gift to all beings in all realms. Through making that offering, we initiate a flow between us and everything else. We begin to appreciate that all forms are completely interconnected and that there is in fact an underlying unity." ⁷

Her mandala is a map that shows the way from the outer world through the layers of an energetic system into an inner, sacred world, where you meet the divine. It is a microcosm of the macrocosm of an energy system. Be it a universe, an ecosystem, a human being, or one cell, all are organized by the same dynamism and have a similar structure. Mandalas help focus the mind and keep meditation places sacred. Like the rose windows in European cathedrals, they are a circle of beauty with symbols that move from chaos to a still point to illustrate leaving the wildness of the outer world to find the harmony within.

8 • *Kali Troma Nagmo*
Goddess of Time



In the dark night you sit in the cremation ground, rhythmically playing your drum and bell as you practice Chöd, the Pacification of Suffering puja. You allow nothing to stop the rhythm, even when the demons pick at you and a cold damp wind whips around your neck, crawling up your spine. The wish to help others keeps you focused on your work, and out of your heart manifests Kali.

She is huge, vast as space, filling the sky before you, dancing and twisting—she is mesmerizing, but you keep on. She has come to help you with the lost souls that need solace and guidance and she is fiercely intent on doing so. Smoke, like a silken scarf, billows around her. There is such intense heat that the very sky catches fire, and soon she is completely surrounded by the flames of pure awareness. She steps triumphantly on the heart of a human corpse to show her conquest over ignorance and delusion as she dances. She blows her trumpet

made of a human thighbone, a sound that pricks the demons' curiosity and draws them near. She brandishes a human skin overhead, and slaps it on the ground, in her work to gather the demons that cause pain and suffering, so that she can liberate them and free us from illness and delusion. She is almost naked, wearing a tiger skin skirt and bone ornaments, pieces strung together, found in the smoldering funeral pyres. They are her way of saying she has gone beyond convention. She is free, wild, fierce and loving, passionate in her compassion for all, and in her wish to help us to be free.

9 . *Skull Cup* Of the Inner Offering



The Inner Offering is a heavily symbolic offering visualized in the highest tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhism. It is a symbol of the work needed to transform the mind to overcome the illusions of our life: what we think life is; what we think is good, desirable or normal; and anything else that obscures the truth and the ability to reach enlightenment.

A cup, made of a human skull, rests on three heads, representing past, present and future time, and also the practitioner's body, speech, and mind that are purified with spiritual practice. The single fissure at the front of the skull cup represents the fact that we need both "method and wisdom" to reach enlightenment: the tried and true teachings and writings of all the practitioners before us, and the cultivation of our intellect. On either side of the skull cup beyond the frame are two nectar-filled vases with a sandalwood pole topped with yak tails. Victory flags flutter in the wind from each pole, stirred up by the flames below the skull cup. This card represents a celebration. It's not so easy to overcome our conditioning and the ways of the world. The flame also indicates the intense focus on practice that builds up heat in the human energetic system. Fire flares up from that heat, melting and boiling all the products of human existence and life in the world, including the five waste products of the human body, transforming them into an elixir called *Amrita*. When spiritual practice bears fruit, the body's energies dissolve and move up the central channel. This is symbolized by the white syllable "Ah" above the skull cup. The fire of intense practice burns away all impurities in the heart, body and mind. It opens the central channel, and the energy, now awakened and enlivened, pierces through the chakras to bring enlightenment.

10 · Padmasambhava

The 8th Century Mahasiddha Wildman



Mahasiddha are practitioners who reach a high level of mastery of their practice or craft. Once there, everything about them has a certain ringing note of perfection—you feel the dharma viscerally. Teachings seem to seep out of their pores. They “accidentally” say things that are exactly what you needed to hear at that very moment. Doors open in your mind that you previously didn’t know were there and realizations burst forth like popcorn. They are so in tune to the Way, so in tune to the flow of the universe and the dance of truth and life, that to be around them is a joy. This might be in part why Padmasambhava could behave as he did, and still accomplish great things and be recognized as the saint that he was.

Padmasambhava is the founder of the Nyingmapa School of Tibetan Buddhism, the oldest of the four schools of Buddhism. He was an Indian tantric master who brought his teachings to Tibet, flouting tradition, causing outrage, and in general stirring up everyone and everything in his amazing life—spirits, people and

practitioners. He had the ability to charm disturbing harmful spirits. Thirteen times he called upon the spirit-monsters of the lands he traveled through on his journey, taming them and getting them to agree to help him by protecting the teachings and spreading the dharma, rather than be a hinderance to him and to the local people. All through his life he was a controversial figure as he used a wide variety of skills in his teachings: magic, lecture, meditation, drinking sprees, and shocking the pants off his students. There are several accounts of his flouting of convention causing such outrage that people attempted to burn him at the stake, but he emerged untouched each time. He is revered by Buddhists to this day for his gifts to the Tibetan people and is considered to be the most famous of the mahasiddhas.

11 · Princess Mandarava First Wife to Padma Sambhava



Mandarava was the first consort of the famous adept Padmasambhava, the great 8th century mahasiddhi. She was an intelligent, beautiful Indian princess, bookish to a fault, interested only in scholarly study, learning and teaching the dharma. Her father, the

king of a province in northeast India, let her devote herself to study of all the sciences, arts and teachings available in her time and by the age of 13, she had mastered them all. At the age of 16, her reputation had spread throughout China and India and she began to receive many suitors, but her inclination was towards spiritual growth rather than the worldly life of a royal wife. She pleaded with her father to let her take vows to become a Buddhist nun and remain a spiritual seeker. He eventually relented, giving her a palace and 500 ladies in waiting to live with, in a heavily guarded enclave. And then her life took another course: Padmasambhava, the enigmatic mahasiddhi of the time, spontaneously appeared within her compound and began teaching. He must have been mesmerizing. She became his consort at the age of 16. A consort is a partner that a tantric master takes on in his work. It's not just a love-match, as the couple uses their union to further refine and understand the energy of enlightenment. But her father was so enraged that she had decided on what he thought was a worldly life after all, having spurned so many politically advantageous suitors, that he attempted to burn Padmasambhava on a funeral pyre and imprisoned his daughter in a pit. Padmasambhava emerged unharmed. A lake formed where he had been sent to burn alive. Because of the miracle, Mandarava's father consented to their union and accepted Padmasambhava and her path as one devoted to spreading Buddhist dharma. She is often painted at Padmasambhava's side, along with his other primary consort, Yeshe Tsyogal.

12 · *The Ecstatic Dakini* Lion-Headed SimhaMukha



What is this ecstasy about? It is a little hard to tell, because she has the face of a lion, but she is in love with the dharma, wild and fierce in her defense of those who seek it, and she gleams with the fervor of one with a mission. She is capable of goading, shoving and nagging practitioners who are sliding towards the wrong path, but she is always doing it out of love.

SimhaMukha is a female dakini-form of the great Mahasiddha Padmasambhava, although some say she was his principle dakini teacher. She is also the Buddhist version of the Hindu warrior goddess Durga who rides a lion or tiger. She is called the queen of the dakinis, and as in so many instances, where eras and eons bleed into one another through rebirths, new regimes, and archetype re-creations over time, she is also Queen of the Matrikas, seven ancient Hindu female goddesses. She has some similarities with the Egyptian Sekhmet, and in the West,

her essence is what we might call the Crone, the old wise woman, whose looks have fallen away leaving only the wisdom left to see.

She is a wisdom goddess and can be a *yidam*, a personal protector deity. She repulses psychic attacks, subdues demons, and keeps nightmares and dark energies away. She helps transform anger or wrath into enlightened awareness and subdues misguided beings. She is naked and her hair is disheveled, as are all dakinis, because she represents going beyond the conventions of society. Her mind is calm, there is no background noise, she is completely present here and now.

13 · *The Brilliant Mind of Ushnishavijaya* Goddess of Long Life



In Buddhist practice there is a puja, or prayer, to promote the health and happiness of the community. This painting illustrates a visualization central to this puja, called The Queen of Great Bliss. The meditations, mantras and prayers on gratefulness, and the offerings to all the spirits and deities of the community, eventually open a door and there within is lovely

Ushnishavijaya. But it takes a little work to meet her. First you greet and give offerings to Vajravarahi, the red goddess of the kundalini energy, represented here by the red background. When she is pleased, you can pass into the next level where you meet Green Tara, holding her two blue flowers and sitting on a green lotus. You pay your respects and then Green Tara melts away and there, in her place, is the Goddess of Long Life whom we have come to meet, folded into the quiet center of these two goddesses.

Soon after attaining enlightenment, the Buddha manifested 32 major and eight minor characteristics. One of these features was the *ushnisha*, a cranial protuberance that served as a physical reminder of his heightened intelligence. Ushnishavijaya is the deification of this distinctive mark of the Buddha. Her name means “victorious goddess of the Ushnisha,” and refers to her exceptional intelligence. Her mantra prayer eliminates the suffering that comes about when people follow the wrong path, turning away from what they know is really right.

Ushnishavijaya is seated in meditation in the center of a green lotus, flanked by blue flowers to show that she is in Green Tara’s heart. The drum on the left symbolizes the rhythm of the heart drawing people and energy to the practice. Her curved knife on the right is used in a sky burial. One leg, like Green Tara’s, extends so that she can stand and take action at a moment’s notice. Her right hand makes the gesture of offering and her left holds a vase full of an elixir that grants long life.

14 · *Durga the Warrior Goddess* Dispeller of Darkness

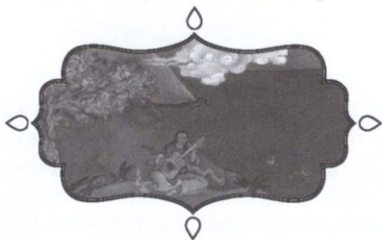


There is a Hindu legend that goes like this: a long time ago, there was a demon loose in the world. None of the gods could conquer this meddlesome being, and so they got together to create a creature that would have all of their attributes and fighting skills to set it on the monster and kill it once and for all. They agreed it should be stronger than the tallest mountain, fiercer than the fiery winds that rage in a forest fire, more clever than the smartest sage, and with the perseverance of a snail set to crawl across a forest floor. They created Durga and gave her all of their weaponry, and she destroyed the demon.

Devotees of Durga invoke her for protection against negative psychic forces, entities from the lower realms, gossip and maliciousness, be it from others or from our own dark side. She is red, the color of the root chakra, which governs survival. She has had many incarnations over the centuries and cultures of time: Kali, Bhagvati, Ambika, Lalita, Gauri, Kandalini, Jara, Simhamukha, and more. She rides a tiger to

show that she has great courage and fortitude and that she has mastered her own willpower and determination so that they have become tools for growth rather than self-serving. She and all her incarnations are celebrated several times a year in festivals called Navrati.

15 · A Devotee
Offering his Gift of Song



Like the origin of a great river, a spiritual practice springs up and flows out of us to create a fertile life. To work in the spirit of puja with the deities and demons of the ethereal world there are always offerings given at the start of the practice to help initiate that flow. They can be in physical forms, such as food and wine, soft fabrics and beautiful things like pearls and jewels, or by intentions, through music and prayer. Fierce deities like offerings of a fierce nature: meat, alcohol, and fire, but benevolent deities love the sweet and beautiful. In Buddhist thankga art, offerings are painted below deities to express respect for the principle that you have to give and empty yourself in order to be able to receive. If you make a space inside yourself the light will flood in.

Here, a practitioner sits at the edge of a lake, a lake of tears that the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara shed when he saw the suffering of the world. He sits at his guru's feet, playing his guitar, offering music.

Offerings are consciousness in action. With them, a practitioner shows the intent to acknowledge the gifts that are being given or requested. To get the attention of a teacher and show that you are serious, it is helpful to give first. Just like in greeting a person you hope to establish a relationship with, if you give even a little thing, like just saying "hello" with a smile or a present, it opens the other person's heart and their love will flow to you. Rather than sit and expect the world to give to us, it is always best to be the giver first—you will get more of a response.

16 · *Amoghasiddhi*

Buddha Guardian of the North



Amoghasiddhi is one of the five enlightened Buddha family lords. He is the Buddha of action, lord of the karma family, and guardian of the north. He represents the 5th day in the bardo, the passageway

through the realm of death. He, or his energy, color and symbols, often appears in mandalas at the top of the circle. His name means “unobstructed success.”

His emblem is the double dorje, or a sword. Metal elements represent the freedom of energy to move in any direction or in all directions at once. They stand for the idea that the fearlessness he cultivates in us, when we work with him, comes from a full and balanced development of all sides of ourselves. It is easy to develop one's strengths and use them to get along in life, but Amoghasiddhi understands that a person has to become a whole well-rounded human being, capable of responding to any situation or stress. To do that one must work on his weakest characteristics. You can't just be a computer programmer by day and a father by night—you have to cultivate interests, skills, passions and relationships.

Amoghasiddhi's hands are in the abhaya mudra meaning fearless—you can call on him when you are afraid. He is associated with the element of air and with sound. He transforms the spiritual poisons of disdain and envy into their opposite, the gift of equanimity. He is shown as he appears, out of the midnight sky.

17 · Lalita Tripurasundari

The Playful Red Goddess



Lalita Tripurasundari's name means "the playful goddess of the three celestial cities." This Indian goddess, in her delight, creates all of manifestation. She is the supreme being that pervades all that is: the creation, the maintenance, and the dissolution of matter and energy. She is the power behind the cosmic tide of the universe. She is the central goddess of the Shakti tradition called the *Sri Yantra*, or *Sri Vidya* practice and her mandala also appears in this deck. She sits at the center of the mandala, so tiny and ethereal that she can't be seen; only the energy that radiates out from her becomes form that our eyes can focus on. Her practice is considered to be the highest, most sophisticated Hindu spiritual practice and path to enlightenment. Only those that she lets into her mandala can practice her sadna.

One of her practices involves chanting her 300 names—every term of endearment and joy at the beauty of life and the qualities most prized within it are contained in her names: "she who shines with

the radiance of gold...she whose brilliance puts the japa flowers to shame...she is the cooling rays of the moon, the illuminating rays of the sun, she is the swan upon the pond of Hrim..."⁸

Lalita is the personification of happiness and she is intense and strong. It would take a galactic force of destruction to rock her from her state. She is the true feminine, not the wilting lily concept of femininity. Doing her sadna, joy flows out from us, above and around us, opening doors to other realms, to boardrooms and classrooms and dream homes and the heart. From behind these doors can be heard the happy laughter of 100,000 children in the celestial cities of delight.

18 · Vishnu

God-Preserver of the Celestial Realms



Vishnu is the protector of the celestial realm, the smiling, compassionate, strong force of the sky. He is the pervading power that fills the void, the original sound, the "big bang."

Blue is his color, and he wears the jewelry and clothes of a maharaja to show his kingly nature. He is often shown with his wife Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune. (He did have three wives but he couldn't tolerate their fighting all the time and he sent Saraswati, goddess of the arts and wisdom, to Brahma, and Ganga, goddess of the river Ganges, to Shiva.) Vishnu is also often depicted riding Garuda, or in a triad between Brahma the Creator and Shiva the Destroyer. Together, this triad creates the universe as we know it.

The entire universe is filled with Vishnu, which means "expanding." Another name he goes by is Narayan, which means "one who dwells in water," as all of life comes out of water, and water sustains all life. He rides on the sunbird Garuda every day, traveling across the daytime sky. Garuda represents the soul, so when Vishnu is with him he represents the potent power within the soul of each individual person. Vishnu has had many incarnations but the ones most well known are Rama, from the epic tale the *Ramayana*, Krishna from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the Buddha. It is said that the next incarnation, his last one, will signify the end of the world.

Vishnu carries four items that represent the aspects of the world he is responsible for: the discus, symbolizing power; the lotus, symbolizing fertility; a conch, symbolizing Om, the original sound; and the mace, symbol of the strength of time.

19 · 1,000 Armed Avalokitesvara

He Who Looks Compassionately Upon the Earth



Avalokitesvara made a vow to relieve suffering and help others reach enlightenment. He worked for eons, but found that he hadn't helped others at all. In his despair and with a deep desire to complete his vow, his arms shattered into 1000 arms, giving him the ability to help many more people. Each palm has an eye in it so that he can see everywhere, into every corner of humankind's homes and hearts, and find out where he is needed. That is where he gets his name, which means "one who looks down."

His head shattered into 11 heads, each one versed in a different form of compassion and ability. They represent the fact that he has mastered all ten stages of a bodhisattva, each phase dominated by a particular attitude. Three of the faces are loving, three are peaceful, and four are fierce. Sometimes help isn't delivered with a sweet smile, and sometimes it knows that its gifts are only received through fierce action. His form is bizarre, and his snarling faces confuse us. His image as a whole shows that form,

and sometimes lifestyle, range out of the norm when a human being makes the leap into enlightenment.

In India he is named Padmapani or Lokeśvara.

Avalokitesvara's mantra is "*Om mani padme hum.*"

He is the patron and guardian of the Tibetan people, who call him Chenrezi. He holds to his heart the wish-fulfilling gem of the Bodhichitta, the desire to grow spiritually.

Avalokitesvara's dilemma at feeling like he wasn't helping others is a window into the idea that we, as small humble individuals, can do very little to change the world. We somehow have to transcend the idea of a limited existence to really become a helper to humanity.

20 · *Vajrasattva*

Father of the Five Buddha Families



Vajrasattva is the father of the five Buddha families, the complete embodiment of all of their wisdoms, the *paterfamilias* of us all. He exists beyond time and space in that place of sameness and oneness before

the birth of the 10,000 things. He helps practitioners become purified in body, speech and mind by realizing their deepest nature. In a lucid moment of simplicity brought to light after all the struggles of the mind and heart, working to become a better person or all the other aims and aspirations we struggle with in the quest for happiness, he helps us realize that we were never impure, never full of sin, or in need of any improvement at all.

Vajrasattva has various roles, but this realization of self-acceptance is the one most commonly sought after by practitioners practicing his sadhana. He also helps keep one devoted to practice and repairs broken tantric vows. A golden vajra balances on end above his right palm, representing the Mind, one of the ways a practitioner can enter into the mandala of Reality. The left hand holds a silver bell that is at rest on his thigh representing wisdom. Together, they represent the fusion of all polarities into one enlightened experience. He looks down at us with a gaze of total acceptance. His practice is a good antidote to irrational guilt or self-hatred. In contrast to the Christian doctrine of original sin, tantric Buddhism asserts original purity. We are born pure, but then we get lost in the world. Stories about his nature often have to do with having lost your way, and like the prodigal son, returning to your true home, or the realization of your true nature of purity. He is associated with the dawn of the morning, the start of the new, the potential to begin again.

21 · *Prajnaparamita*

Wisdom Goddess of the Three Times



Prajnaparamita means “the perfection of wisdom.” Centuries ago, intense study led to a flourishing of writings from the soul, works to help others find their path. When someone is in the flow and writing from the heart, the ring of truth is there in the words and it reaches your core. The written word from people like this was exciting and unusual. The texts they made, written by hand from the work of monastics, made them even more special. It is hard for us to imagine the reverence that these writings held for people of an age before the corner bookshop, computers, and on-demand printing. They were scarce; other than word of mouth, there was no technology to tell you they existed, and you had to travel far distances for the opportunity to study with someone who had read them. Maybe if you were lucky you could also look upon the text itself.

Over time the tantric writings called “*sutras*” were distilled into two great works, the Diamond Sutras and the Heart Sutras. These sacred texts were

revered, their words thought to have been transmitted from a higher realm to the mortals below and flowing out to the world through their pens. This transmission, or energy-entity, for lack of a better word, was acknowledged as a goddess of wisdom. She is perhaps the same one that guided Shakespeare's hand, and all the other Greats whose works far surpass their culture, time and education.

The image of Prajnaparamita holding her book, offering it to us, is a personification of all of the work, worship, and rarity of those ancient written words. Prajnaparamita gives birth to new ideas, to the fulfillment of spiritual practice. She is radiant with the joy of knowledge and is generous and giving. She is handing us the text that will answer some of our greatest riddles.

22 · *Vajrapani Hayagriva* Guardian at the Temple Gate



The bodhisattva Vajrapani is often painted in thangka next to the Buddha with Avalokitesvara on the opposite side, sort of like the bouncers for Buddhism.

When you visit a temple you will meet him. He is often placed at the entrance to ward off anyone who might come to harm the teachings, the spiritual community sangha, or the temple.

He is strong and unwavering, and so his body appears to us as massive and heavy, a symbol of strength. He is a protector of the teachings and removes obstacles to them. He stands in the Indian Warrior yoga pose, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. He holds an implement called a *vajra*, symbol of the energy channels of the body, while his other hand is raised in the threatening gesture. He represents the power of all Buddhas.

When a horse's head projects out of Vajrapani's head, he becomes the deity Hayagriva, a *yidam*, or personal protector deity. They are like mirrors to our true self, and interestingly, they are all fierce with the intent to grow. It is their core purpose, and our core purpose in this world. As a practitioner matures, they begin to visualize their yidams and identify with them. Through this work they see their personality traits, their profession, chemistry and personality as just so much flotsam in the water, and don't take it all so to heart. They become humble when they realize they are not really who they used to think they were and they are then freed from the prison of their human experience. Fearlessness arises, and they are able to truly serve others as their human-ness drops off like an old coat discarded with the coming of spring.

23 · *Medicine Buddha* The Lapis Lazuli Healer King



The Medicine Buddha's proper name is Bhaisajya-guru-vaidurya-prabha-rajā, which means "King of Medicine and Lapis Lazuli Light." He is the same Buddha as the blue Buddha of the Eastern Pure Land, Akshobhya, but this painting shows him in a specific role as a master healer. He wears the three robes of a Buddhist monk and holds a lapis-colored bowl of medicine nectar in his left hand. The lapis stone is associated with healing and mystic powers to strengthen and purify. His right hand rests on his right knee, holding the stem of the Aruna fruit or Myrobalan plum between thumb and forefinger. This fruit has many healing qualities. Just seeing his image or his name, which is "Sangye Menla" in Tibetan, has healing properties. He cures suffering using the medicine of his teachings. But most importantly he cures us of ignorance, as it is the root of all of our illnesses. These two missions were part of his 12 vows to aid humankind for all time.

There is a saying in the Five Element Acupuncture system of healing, coined by Dianne Connelly, that "*all sickness is homesickness.*"⁹ It means that the root of all suffering begins at the emotional level. Suffering is eased through relationship, whether through connection to our highest Self or to others. 'Ignorance' is another way of saying the same thing; our emotions walk us around the block and create confusion. In Buddhism and in Five Element medical theory anger, sorrow, worry, grief and fear are called the Five Poisons. They do not solve problems but lead us further into them, and away from others and our Self. Wisdom brings with it the ability to feel the emotions but never to become stuck or defined by one. With spiritual practice and cultivating health, which are really the same path, the five gifts: compassion, joy, loyalty, discernment and wisdom become the lens through which we see and experience the world. They allow us to extend to others without ever being diminished.

24 · Sri Yantra

Cosmic Map to Your True Playful Laughing Self



Lalita Tripurasundari is the playful red goddess who, in her delight, creates all of manifestation. Her yantra, or Chakramandala, is a map of the emergence of energies from her most inner subtle vibration to the most outer coarse level of form, the level we see with our eyes. The central point is the scintillation of the goddess herself. She can be compared to the first words in the Christian bible: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The energy sound waves vibrate outward, surrounding her with five downward facing triangles of female energy that intersect with four upward facing male energy triangles. Their convergence creates the universe.

The next level of energy is represented by petals containing the Sanskrit vowels and consonants. The energy of this level is knowable to us as sound, and therefore language. People commonly say Sanskrit is a holy language. Perhaps the early languages were more connected to the divine than languages that

evolved out of them because they were born at a time when people were closer to nature and their own Selves. Feelings and impressions, coalescing into ideas, formed into sounds that came from a heart less obscured.

The petals are surrounded by an outer square representing the earth. It has doorways, or gates, called *bhupura*. This is where and how practitioners can engage in practice to connect to Lalita. The topmost gate is the eastern gate and represents the Way of mantras. The western gate at the bottom represents the Performance of rites and rituals. The northern gate to the left is entryway via the Path of intellect and wisdom, and the southern gate is an entryway through *bhakti*—the spirit of devotional love.

The earth level shows Ganesh and the *matrikas*, seven ancient fierce mother-goddesses: Chamunda (Kali), Vaishnavi (Lakshmi), Brahmani (Devi), Kaumari (Saraswati), and Indrani. At this level we see energy and interpret it with our eyes, and so the energy, run through the filter of our brain, looks like human and animal form. The *matrikas* make the mudra gestures “Fear not” and “Granting of blessings” with their central hands, and their other hands hold implements representative of their states. Ganesh to their left is in the first position because in any ceremonial worship it is common to first invoke Lord Ganesh’s help, as he is the remover of obstacles. Bhairava is standing in for his *matrika* consort, Maheshvari (Radani), because he is often placed at the end of the line of *matrikas*.

25 · *Vajravarahi* Enlightened Sky-Dancer of the Kundalini



Vajravarahi is a dakini, a being like a fairy, or energy spirit. Some dakinis are capricious and maybe a little like a witch, but there are two other levels of dakinis; those that guard the sacred places of India and Tibet, and then the enlightened ones, the “sky dancers”—the ones who delight and dance in the experience of Emptiness. Usually they are helpers that support spiritual practice. Vajravarahi belongs to this class. She is the most prominent dakini in Buddhism. She represents our individual energy mechanism, and is the personification of *kundalini*, or *prana*, or *Qi-energy*—all names for the same thing. In human form she is a beautiful, red, dancing, joyful and fiercely strong young woman. She stands on a human being, which represents her ability to crush ignorance and delusion through spiritual practice. In her left hand she holds a skull cup, representing the gifts she offers from her heart. In her right hand she holds up a flaying knife, symbolizing her ability to cut through delusion. It flashes as she moves, razor sharp, the

flames of awareness surrounding her, making sparks fly off the blade.

Vajravarahi has the head of a sow in her hair, as her name means “diamond sow.” The sow, or pig, is a buddhist symbol for delusion. You might think “is that a pig in your hair or is this some new English hat style,” but yes, it’s there—it symbolizes wisdom’s conquest over delusion. This happens not through suppressing our human tendencies, but rather taming the delusions of our ego and using that energy, turning it into compassion and bliss. The sow eats everything. Here it represents the idea that all energies and experiences, thoughts, ideas and lifestyles, are food for growth, when you are accepted as a student by an accomplished tantric teacher. There is the monastic, ascetic path, and then there is the tantric path—it embraces and uses all that life has to offer as grist for your spiritual mill.

26 • *Mantra Seed Symbol* Of the Goddess Vajravarahi



Vajravarahi is a joyful yet fiercely wild dakini, fertile and full of life. Here, above her head, is the sanskrit

symbol of her mantra, her Bija sound, “*Bam*.” Seed syllables, or “bijas” in Sanskrit, are individual sounds that contain the full power of their mantras. Receiving a mantra from an accomplished master breathes life and power into it; it is no longer just a sound. It is empowered, then, to act, to open your mind, and allow you to connect and call to the deity it personifies. Mantras are the spells in the language of magic, or the incantations and prayers in other spiritual traditions.

“*Mantra*” is a Sanskrit word, from the root “*mantram*,” that combines the root *manas* (mind) with *tram* (protection) so the literal meaning is ‘mind-protection’—the primary purpose at the core of all mantra repetition. If you are repeating your mantra it is harder to think about your worries and fears as it protects you from them. It also keeps the mind from straying onto paths that are not helpful. For example, it’s better to say the popular mantra “*Om Mani Padme Om*” over and over again rather than say, for example, “I am so angry at the bus driver I could strangle him!” Carefully chosen speech keeps us in alignment with our intentions to be the best person we can be. Thinking positive words untangles negative energy and clears the air. They are more likely to get the bus driver to pause when you are late and running after the bus than a cloud of angry energy that surrounds a person whose mind is full of angry thoughts.

27 · Dorje Drolö

The Crazy-Wisdom Wrathful Buddha



Dorje Drolö is one of the eight manifestations of Padma Sambhava, a historical figure who is considered to be the archetype embodiment of all the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, love and power of the Buddhist tradition. He rides through the jungle of life on a tigress, and he holds a *purbha*, a magical dagger, for this work.

Padma Sambhava was instrumental in establishing Buddhism in Tibet, bringing it from India in the 8th century. As he traveled through the land he encountered many demons and spirits intent on blocking his progress, as they knew his work was very powerful. Thirteen times he appeared as Dorje Drolö to subdue the harmful spirits of the lands and turn them onto the path of Buddhism. He was, in a way, a proselytizer of the best kind, convincing each demon to come to the aid of the dharma teachings rather than inhibiting them. These creatures are the origins of many of the demonic deities one sees

in Tibetan thangkas—horrific monsters from your worst nightmares turned into pussycats.

Padma Sambhava has eight major manifestations, that is, eight energetic states that he can take on as teacher. He transforms his teaching approach for each situation in order to teach in whatever way will work for different students and different times. Dorje Drolo is an example of Padma Sambhava's reputation of working outside the norms of a culture, a man who discarded the path of normal, logic, and convention. There is a term in Buddhism called "crazy wisdom." He personified this quality.

28 · *Practicing Chöd*



A practitioner sits down to do her sadna. Playing her drum she becomes lulled into another state, eyes closed, she forgets herself and her mind is transported to another realm. She visualizes dancing skeletons and a fence of flames, vast worlds and expansive light-filled skies full of gods and goddesses, huge as mountains. Their many hands each hold an implement with a world of meaning unto itself. Streams

of offerings flow from cups, ghostly spirits show up in the shadows, millions of dakinis, like flickering flames, fill the air.

The practitioner opens herself up to the universe, and asks to connect to the energies of the other side of what her mind can understand. She steadies herself in the midst of the fierce ones' thunder and snarls. Or, if they are sweet, tries to keep her seat; it's equally difficult to look into brilliant eyes full of so much love that they melt your heart. Holding steady, she keeps a theme in her mind, a wish for healing illness, to grow as a person, or maybe just to understand.

Before "civilization" invented the idea of going to school and getting diplomas, the Buddhists figured out another way to prepare for life. Meditation, visualizations, and pujas, or prayers, are a little like going to college; they are advanced study for the mind in preparation for further work. All the visualizations and the texts to be memorized are for the purpose of training the mind to become steady and strong. After this stage the real training begins.

29 · *An Imp*

One of the Eight Classes of Demons



Buddhism recognizes the fact that there are other energies and entities existing in the world that we can't see but that do interact with us and affect us. In the highest sense of the word, "demons" are simply the projections of our own minds, our fears and hopes externalized and given power over us by our own accord: if you wrestle with it, you come under its spell. But if you acknowledge it while remaining calm and open, it passes right through you and doesn't "stick." Spirits are the cause of disease and natural disasters, good luck and bad luck, the source of Charlie Brown's friend Pig-Pen's little black cloud, and the reason a person may see everything like Christopher Robin's friend Eeyore, does, a bit sad and grey. Some demons are parasitic and feed off of negative emotions, and so encourage us to have them. But some are benevolent, and can emit the faint scent of flowers and streams of positive happy thoughts that waft through the air, or cause a shower of blossoms to fall.

During the 7th-9th century there was an attempt to classify these energies. The list has changed over the centuries but it is still known as “The eight classifications of demons,” or “The impure manifestations of the eight types of consciousness.” A few examples are: Sadags, titans or guardians of the upper realms; Maras, obstacle creators; Rahula, the force behind eclipses that bring adversity or obstacles; They Rang, imps that move household objects and make children sick; Rakshasas, demons; Yakshas, tricksters; Mamo, ogres or demonesses; and Nagas, water and earth spirits that live in trees, rocks, and waterways. They can be friendly or antagonistic according to how you treat their home.

30 . *Akshobhya*

In the Realm of the Eastern Pure Lands



Akshobhya is the blue Buddha of the Pure Land of the East, Abhirati. It is a land far from the world that we know, traveled to through a journey in several dimensions; through a landscape, through time, and through intent. His name means

“imperturbable” and he received it through upholding a set of austerity vows for eons. The steadfastness of practice that never wavers from a goal creates a field of energy, which proliferates and gives rise to other energy forms in a creative embellishment of the same demeanor. With Akshobhya’s intense work over a prolonged period of time this process created his Buddha-family called the Vajra Family. All of the family members share his blue color and similar qualities.

A *vajra* is a metal instrument used in tantric ritual. It is a symbol of how the primordial oneness gives rise to the two, and on and on. If you look at the card depicting Vajrasattva, who is in Akshobhya’s family, you can see one in his hand. There is a round sphere in the middle. Two flowers project from it and give birth to stamens, or metal prongs that curve inward and meet around a central prong. The *purbha*, held by another in his family, Vajrakilaya, is a riff on its shape and purpose. They represent many things but most simply they are a symbol of the primary energy channels of the body. In other cultures its function could be likened to Thor’s hammer; it is a thunderbolt that illuminates and crushes anything it comes against. They are often depicted in practitioners and deity’s hands.

Akshobhya is associated with the dawn of the day. His mudra is the earth-touching gesture; what the Buddha did that called the earth goddess to give witness to his moment of enlightenment. His element is water, and the poison that he helps us overcome, or direct into a positive force, is hatred. The gift that

he gives, if we focus deeply on him in meditation, is the wisdom of seeing things exactly as they truly are, without judging, or reacting with attraction or repulsion. The chakra associated with him is the heart.

31 · *Dance with Ganesh*

Remover of Obstacles



Ganesh is a joyful, happy God. He loves to dance in spite of his massive head and body; he is too delighted with life to care. He uses his axe to cut off all bonds and attachments. He makes the mudra “fear not,” promising to protect us. He loves sweets and holds a box of chocolates, representing the pleasure of knowledge and wisdom derived from liberation. He has one tusk, which represents keeping the good, and throwing the rest away. His large ears encourage us to listen, and his small eyes to concentrate. Yellow is the color associated with the Muladhara chakra, which is in the belly, and where the kundalini resides. Ganesh is the deity who guards this chakra, so his large belly has plenty of room for the power of the energy stored there.

Shiva and Parvati, the mother and father of the universe, are Ganesh's parents. During an unfortunate accident, Shiva had Ganesh's head cut off. Parvati was very upset as any mother would be, and threatened to destroy all of creation unless they found him another head immediately. Everyone scurried to do her bidding and the first head found was an elephant's, and so it came to pass. Ganesh was given dominion over all the gods and classes of beings to further soothe Parvati's feelings. And that is why, if you want anything done, or want to request help from celestial beings, you ask Ganesh first to help you with your request. He removes any potential obstacles and helps our endeavors succeed.

32 · *Yeshe Tsogyal*
Wisdom Lake Queen



Yeshe Tsogyal was the most important historical female figure in the tradition of the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma school. Her clan name was the Lady Kharchen, and she was born in Tibet in 757 CE. It was said that at the time of her birth a nearby

lake doubled in size, and so she received the name “Wisdom Lake Queen.” Her story, and the energy around her, is somewhat similar to the Arthurian legend of the Lady of the Lake. Both are magical women who created miracles, entranced men and inspired legends.

She married the king Trisong Detsen in an arranged marriage at the age of 16 but soon became the intimate companion of Padmasambhava, the mahasiddha responsible for bringing Buddhism to Tibet. She is often depicted in his thangkas, kneeling at his left side along with Mandarava, his Indian consort, on the right. Padmasambhava said to her “The basis for realizing enlightenment is a human body. Male or female, there is no great difference. But if she develops the mind bent on enlightenment, the woman’s body is better.” Yeshe Tsogyal received full initiation from Padmasambhava into tantra and became a female adept of the highest order. She could remember his lectures and writings word for word and wrote down everything he said and taught. She continued to work for the people of Tibet after Padmasambhava’s passing. She died at the age of 99, leaving many disciples and influencing many spiritual lineages that remain today. She is now venerated as Tibet’s top female tantric master. One of her spiritual practices, called the Queen of Great Bliss, celebrates the creative energy of the feminine and the vitality of life and creation.

33 · *Vajrakilaya* The Magician



Vajrakilaya holds a three-sided magic dagger called a purbha in his hands. Wooden ones are used for healing and harmonizing, and metal ones, ideally made from meteorite metal, are for work with heavier, more destructive forces. They can fix the sky to the earth, establishing an energy conduit between them. Their energy is fierce, wrathful, piercing, affixing, and transfixing. Vajrakilaya's practice is famous in the Tibetan Buddhist world as the most powerful for destroying forces hostile to compassion and helping purify spiritual pollution. Purbhas are used to bind and pin down demons and negative thought-forms. Like catching a leprechaun to get him to grant you three wishes, you have to pin them down to be able to purify the negative energies and release the constrictions created by them.

Vajrakilaya is a *heruka*, a meditation deity and he is the deity most associated with the purbha's use.

“He is the equivalent of the sum of all three of the Christian archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, with all of their attributes, rolled into one deity.”¹⁰ His practices are so effective and enigmatic that all of the schools of Buddhism use them as major facets of their practice.

There are eight herukas in the Buddhist pantheon; they are fierce beings, usually shown with three faces, in embrace with their consort. Their two wings of the Garuda bird symbolize their union of skillful means and wisdom. We meet the herukas after death, when we are in the in-between phase of existence called the *bardo*, where visions and experiences waft to us from the ether of our own mind's past memories. At first we see peaceful deities but these eventually give way to wrathful forms, and some of these are herukas. They are merely projections of our own minds, our own thoughts and fears. Buddhists are taught that they need to face these projections and not shrink from them. Only then will they have no power over us. To engage or contract in the face of fear is like a magnet to the very thing we are trying to get away from. Contraction pulls in energy, and that is why rebirths happen and why karma is karma; what you identify with, or react to, becomes part of who you are.

34 · Garuda

Protector from the Serpent Race



It's a sunny day and you are idly lying in the grass watching the clouds go by. Suddenly a giant bird flies overhead, so large that his shadow dims the sunlight. You sit up to catch a closer look: it is Garuda, the ancient ruler of the sky. He has the body of a man, and wings and feathers of an eagle with an eagle's beak. Since he is a protector, he sometimes appears at the top of thangkas, but he has many roles in different cultures and appears in both Buddhism and Hinduism. In the Mahabharata, one of the major epic narrative poems from India, Garuda is often invoked for his intense force, speed, and for martial prowess. The epic records his birth: "Garuda burst out of his shell like the birth of a cosmic fiery star." It is an ancient mythic description, perhaps, of the birth of a solar system. He was so large and intense that the gods begged him for mercy, and so he made himself a bit smaller. Vishnu, the god of preservation, rides on his back on his daily flight through the heavens. He is also the Sun god Arya's charioteer and the father of all bird families.

The Garuda birdmen are enemies of the serpents and Nagas, snake-like spirits that live in the waters and earth. Garudas rule the heavens, and the Nagas rule the underworld. Garuda often wears snake jewelry and holds a snake in his talons or beak showing his dominion of that world. He is particularly popular in Indonesia and became their national symbol. Carrying charms with Garuda's image on it protects people from snakebites and evil. Worshipping Garuda removes the effects of poison from the body.

35 . *White Tara* Offers Liberation



Quietly sitting, focused within, White Tara emanates calm. But it is a dynamic calm, a scintillating power that shifts your perspective and so then your life. She offers liberation from the monsters in our minds, and the fears and failures of the heart's wisdom to overcome our human, shadow tendencies. Again and again, in a continuous stream, her intention persists to liberate us from the true disease of ignorance of

who we really are, and what the world is. If you can connect to that stream and flow with it you will rise above your doubts and insecurities, worries and problems, and live a long and happy life.

Earlier we met Tara in her green form, how she is most known, but there are also red Taras, white Taras and blue Taras—21 major forms in all. They represent womanhood in all of her variety and flavors, from stateswoman, to mother, basketball player, and cashier, all of the many ways a woman can be. White Tara is quiet compassion. She sits in diamond lotus posture, both legs folded up beneath her, quietly centered on her intention to give.

36 · *Padampa Senge*

Cremation-Ground Dwelling Tantric Master



Padampa Senge was an 11th century Indian tantric mahasiddha, a wild and irascible person, who disregarded social convention and behaved outlandishly. There is a concept in Buddhism, of startling a student into a state of enlightenment. Saying or doing

something shocking or confusing will momentarily put a student's mind in a still point, allowing for the sudden, illuminating roar of enlightenment to enter. There are many stories of his crazy-wisdom work—he was a master at it!

Padampa Senge was an incarnation of Padma Sambhava and like him, he was instrumental in helping spread Buddhism throughout Tibet. He met Machig Labdron, a reincarnation of Yeshe Tsyogal, on one of his many travels to Tibet. She became his disciple and combined his teachings with her native land's shamanic practices to create the Pacification of Suffering practice called Chöd, which she taught to the people of Tibet. Here, Padampa Senge sits in a cremation ground, the perfect place to perform the Chöd where the veil between this life and the next is thin, playing his Damaru drum and holding aloft a thighbone trumpet. He is dressed in a tiger skin, and smears his body with the ashes of cremated bodies. He is ready to contact the other side and ask for help in healing others.

Now might be a good time to put a word in about that maligned word, "tantric." There is the path of asceticism, where one lives a monastic life, wears robes, restricts activities and diet, and who one comes in contact with, or the path of the tantric, where one lives in the world, makes a living, and practices as well. A tantric can be a musician, wife, or anyone. Once initiated into tantric practice everything and everyone in life is suddenly ignited to become the fuel for your growth. The tantric path is

considered to be a faster route to enlightenment, although more difficult. To give you an idea—to climb a mountain you can stroll slowly and comfortably up a 700 mile plateau, or you can decide to take up rock climbing, gear up at your local outdoor store, and climb up the 100 mile face of the mountain.

37 · *Chakrasamvara*

Union of Wisdom & Compassion



These two lovers cannot exist without each other. United as one, they have the means to reach their goal. Together, Samvara and Vajravarahi blend wisdom and compassion that flowers into enlightenment. Vajravarahi holds a vajra chopper, symbolizing the cutting through of false ideas and the belief that we are separate from God. Her lover Samvara is completely engaged with her but at the same time he is conscious and aware of what is happening in the world. His other faces look right and left and behind him. He isn't immersed solely in his sexual delight, he is present, calm, and working. Beyond the card

edge, he holds a skull cup full of blood as well as an offering to, and therefore conquest over, demonic forces. His trident symbolizes his mastery of the energy flow in the three central channels of the body and the power that comes from knowing how to move them. The severed head represents humanity and shows that despite great accomplishments, the Buddha remains humble and human. He stands in warrior pose, as spiritual work is demanding. It takes intensity and the strength of heart of a warrior to persevere through every stage and mundane trial of life. No one escapes—not even an accomplished master. We all face the same struggles.

In Buddhist art the pose of lovemaking is considered so much more than sexual: it is called the father-mother union, or *YabYum*—kind of like a yin yang symbol. There are other examples of *YabYum* couples in the Buddhist pantheon, but this example is a representation of *Chakrasamvara* practice. The feminine represents wisdom; the masculine, compassion. It is refreshing to see the act of love portrayed simply and proudly, without hiding behind fig leaves or gauzy curtains. Buddhism fully embraces our humanity and acknowledges that the body is along for the ride. It is a joyful part of the work towards enlightenment.

38 · *White Mahakala* God of Prosperity & Wealth



White Mahakala is a fierce, fiery dharma protector, the god of wealth and prosperity. He leans forward earnestly, offering you jewels and wealth in whatever form you desire. At the same time he is looking around you to ward off anyone or anything that might obstruct your ability to accept the wealth he offers. The wealth can be anything that is needed: material things, love or growth. He doesn't discriminate, but the gifts come about when there is the intent to create a flow with them. His ability to give is tied directly to the practitioner's wish to give. The gifts and treasures are a combination of what the practitioner needs to sustain himself so that he can help others and the gifts that he can give to them. He personifies all that he is and so he is surrounded by a sea of jewels, bubbling and roiling in a vast expanse, his scarf stirred up by the effulgence that flows from the wealth that endlessly pours out of him. He holds a skull cup with three jewels flaming inside it. They represent the three jewels of practice: the teacher, the

teachings and the spiritual community. They are the main gifts that he has to give, as they are the most powerful ones.

Practitioners ask him to come and be present as they perform his puja by chanting the mantra invocation *"From the sandalwood grove deathgrounds, like a swirling mass of white clouds of autumn, O white protector, supreme teaching guardian, playful emanation of Padmapani, please come here pouring rains of jewels!"*¹¹

39 · *The Eight Manifestations of Padmasambhava* The Lotus Born One



Padmasambhava is an archetype embodiment of all the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, love and power of the Buddhist tradition, but he was a human being, born in India in the 8th century. He brought Buddhism to Tibet, traveling there by foot, and built the first Buddhist monastery there at Samye. He is the founder of the Nyingma School of Buddhism,

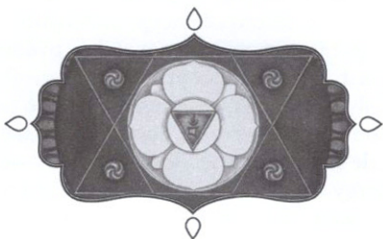
and is lovingly called Guru Rimpoche, Revered Teacher. He is represented here in the various energetic states he takes on as a teacher in his first and future lives. He transforms his approach to each situation in order to best teach in whatever way is needed for different students and different times.

The central figure is a portrait of the monk King of Zahor. Below, he is represented as Guru Shakya Senge, wearing the three yellow monastic robes. These two are about the study of *sutras*, religious writings. At top left is his manifestation as Chakrasamvara, in embrace with his female practice partner consort. In paintings, he is usually represented in that position, like this as Urgyen Dorjr Chang, another version of a Bodhisattva in embrace. However, this thangka's iconography was changed according to the commissioner's teacher's instructions, a common practice to make a thangka most relevant to a practitioner. Below him is Pema Gyalpo, the Lotus King, portrayed as a cremation ground dweller. There are Buddhist practices done in cremation grounds because they are places where the line is thin between this world and the world of spirits, gods and ghosts, many of whom are called upon for various reasons. Opposite him is King Loden Choksey, the Wise Seeker of Excellence. At the bottom middle right is the monk Nyima Odzer, or "Sunrays guru," another cremation ground practitioner. Below the central figure and to the outer sides are two wilder, wrathful manifestations: Guru Senge Dradok on the right, whose

name means “one who teaches with a lion’s voice,” trampling on any forces harmful to the dharma, and to the left, Dorje Drolo, subduer of demons.

He is flanked by two of his five consorts, the ones most revered for their contributions to Buddhism—Machig Labdrom and Mandarava, on the left and right respectively.

40 · *Vajravarahi’s Creation-Fusion Mandala* Bliss Swirls of Delight



Vajravarahi symbolizes the energy of life itself: *qi*, *prana*, or *kundalini*, these are the names of the vital force energy in the cultures that revere her. The symbol we know as the Swastika was originally “*Svasika*” in Sanskrit. It has been used in many cultures to symbolize this vital energy, much earlier than when it was adopted by an army bent on destruction. Hitler’s version was drawn in reverse; perhaps subconsciously there was a wish for death on many levels in that regime. Vajravarahi’s body posture has arms and legs bent to mimic the *Svasika* form. This depicts

the energy flow as it brings life to the human subtle energy body—up the right side and down the left, swirling in a circle. Vajravaraḥi is the outer form of the secret inner form of Kali, or Troma Nagmo. She is one of the main deities of the Chöd Pacification of Suffering practice, which in itself is older than any currently living religion. The practice was adopted by the Buddhists and so her practice is still alive today, after thousands of years.

This mandala is another geometric representation of Vajravaraḥi's energetic state. In general, mandalas are about the harmony of energy as it swirls around a central point representing the god or goddess that manifests it. You see them in every culture; they are universally popular expressions of the wish to draw and create beauty. Here, the downward triangle is the female energy, intersecting with the upward male energy triangle. Four bliss swirls represent the creation-fusion that comes from female/male union. Vajravaraḥi is all about life and regeneration. She helps practitioners connect to the wish to grow and help others during difficult spiritual eras.

The Five Dakinis

Practicing Buddhism is like looking at the world through a prism that splits the light into five different light-illuminated colors. It gives us a language to understand why we are the way we are. Our emotions, thoughts and neurosis—all of it can be divided into five categories. This division also gave rise to a

medical system based on the five elements of metal, water, wood, fire and earth, practiced throughout Asia. Each of the five colors has a different feeling, and falls in a different direction: north, south, east, west and center. This structure forms the basis for mandalas; each one represents some or all of the qualities of the five Buddhas of the four cardinal directions with the fifth being the center. Along with being associated with the energy of direction, each Buddha has a family of enlightened beings, including dakinis that have similar attributes.

The five races of dakinis dance free and uninhibited to show they are active potent manifestations of energy. They emerge out of the heart of the wisdom dakini, a higher form of dakini, to come to our aid, moving through the expanse of the mind, and subside back into wisdom dakini when their work is done. Their femininity is linked with the symbolism of space or sky and the ability to give birth, or to bring potential into expression. The set of five dakini cards within this deck shows the dakinis as they look in some of the Nyingma Buddhist practices. They hold skull cups full of ambrosia nectar, and a vajra cutting knife symbolizing the cutting through the illusion of duality, the belief in right and wrong, and our separation from divinity.

41 · *Buddha Dakini*

The White Buddha Family of the Center



Buddha dakini is an enlightened wisdom dakini. She is associated with Vairochana, the Buddha family of the center, the color white, the element of space, the gift of Dharmadhatu, the hand mudra of turning the wheel of the dharma, the poison of ignorance and the emblem of the golden dharma chakra. She is also associated with the magical function of pacifying, the crown chakra, and the first day in the bardo. She helps manifest the awakening of enlightened awareness in the mind-stream of practitioners, revealing dormant spiritual impulses. She can also grant worldly Siddhis—supernatural powers.

42 • *Ratna Dakini*
The Yellow Buddha Family of the South



Ratna dakini is an enlightened wisdom dakini. She is associated with Ratnasambhava, the Buddha family of the South, the color yellow, mid-day, the earth element, the gift of sameness, the hand mudra of supreme giving, the poison of pride and the emblem of a jewel. She is also associated with increasing or enriching, the navel chakra, and the third day in the bardo. She helps manifest the awakening of enlightened awareness in the mind-stream of practitioners, revealing dormant spiritual impulses. She can also grant worldly Siddhis—supernatural powers.

43 · *Padma Dakini* The Red Buddha Family of the West



Along with being associated with the energy of direction, each Buddha has a family of enlightened beings, including dakinis that have similar attributes. Padma dakini is an enlightened wisdom dakini. She is associated with Amitabha, the Buddha family of the west, the color red, the fire element, sunset, the gift of discrimination, the hand mudra of meditation, the poison of greed and the emblem of the lotus. She is also associated with the magical function of attraction and fascination, the throat chakra, and the fourth day in the bardo. She helps manifest the awakening of enlightened awareness in the mind-stream of practitioners, revealing dormant spiritual impulses. She can also grant worldly Siddhis—supernatural powers.

44 . *Karma Dakini*

The Green Buddha Family of the North



Karma dakini is an enlightened wisdom dakini. She is associated with Amoghasiddhi the Buddha family of the north, the color green, midnight, the gift of accomplishment, the abhaya mudra of fearlessness, and the poison of envy. She is also associated with the perineal chakra, the fifth day in the bardo, the double vajra, and the magical function of pacifying. She helps manifest the awakening of enlightened awareness in the mind-stream of practitioners, revealing dormant spiritual impulses. She can also grant worldly Siddhis—supernatural powers.

45 · *Vajra Dakini*

The Blue Buddha Family of the East



Vajra dakini is an enlightened wisdom dakini. She is associated with Akshobhya, the Buddha family of the east, the color deep blue, the water element, the dawn of the day, the gift of mirror-like wisdom, the hand mudra of earth-touching, the poison of hatred and the emblem of the vajra. She is also associated with the magical function of destroying, the heart chakra, and the second day in the bardo. She helps manifest the awakening of enlightened awareness in the mind-stream of practitioners, revealing dormant spiritual impulses. She can also grant worldly Siddhis—supernatural powers.

46 · *Rahula*

Fierce Planetary Deity of the Sky



Rahula began his life as Rahu, a maleficent troublemaker, born under a bad sign (pun intended). He was the son of a Nag, the snake deities and earth treasure guardians, and a Rakshasa, a demon. Legend has it that he snuck into a feast and sat between the sun and moon, causing an uproar and a scuffle when they discovered him, whereupon they cut off his head. His head then roamed the sky occasionally swallowing the sun or the moon in spiteful revenge, creating eclipses. Astrology, in general, finds that calamities and disasters occur with the occlusion of the sun or moon's rays, and so he was greatly feared.

The famous Mahasiddha, Padmasambhava, on his journey from India to Tibet, ran into a number of terrifying demons that plagued the land. One of them was Rahu. But Padmasambhava was a crafty and gifted enigmatic magician. He tamed Rahu by first getting him to tell him his name, then taking his power from him, and so binding him to the ways

of Buddhism. Like convincing the mafia to work on a sting operation for the FBI, Rahula became a heavy for the good guys. With his terrifying eyes and gaping mouth he now protects and defends the Buddhist teachings. His name became Rahu-la, "La" meaning Lord. Surrounded by flames that signify his high mastery, Rahula is the Naga King and poison is his favorite substance. He rules over gamblers, prostitutes and atheists.

47 · Eight-Armed Quan Yin Bodhisattva of Compassion



In another card we met the male form of the Chinese Quan Yin called "1000 Armed Avalokiteshvara." She has many forms and names as she is an ancient deity usually painted as androgynous, which may explain how she can cross borders and change gender. Quan Yin is a bodhisattva, a being who out of compassion doesn't enter nirvana so that they may aid the sufferings of the world. The Dalai Lamas, spiritual leaders of the Buddhist people, are all said to be emanations of this deity.

Quan Yin is as vast as space. She appears over a lake, full of the tears she wept when she looked down upon the world with all its struggles and disease and confusion. She holds to her heart the wish-fulfilling gem of Bodhichitta—the desire to grow spiritually. That is her guiding light in her quest to help others, it is what keeps her focused on her Path through the thicket of emotions and the darkness of all desires and dreams. On her right, one hand holds a mala for reciting the mantra, “*Om Mani Padme Hum.*” Another hand holds a wheel symbolizing the combined aspects of spiritual teaching and benevolent governance. The third reaches out in the boon granting gesture, which means the gift of blessings to humankind. On her left, she holds a lotus representing that the flowering of enlightenment lies in compassionate activity. A bow and arrow symbolizes the marriage of meditation and wisdom. A vase holds the elixir of immortality, symbolizing that enlightenment results in boundless life.

48 · *A Fierce Purbha-Wielding Blue Dakini* Conduit from the Sky to the Earth



This dakini holds her purbha dagger in the staking position as her scarf billows around her in the inky gloom of delusion. She is fiercely committed to pinning down any obstructions to the dharma and helping humanity even in the face of heavy dark forces. She is dark blue as, in the tradition of the Movement Center who commissioned her, she is part of the Buddha family in the center of mandalas. Her color represents the central energy channel in the body, the *Shushumna*, where in advanced Buddhist practice the energy is absorbed and flows upward to break open the dragon gate at the crown of the head, creating enlightenment.

Dakinis manifest in many forms, and represent the potency of female energy to give birth, representing the creation of newness—of ideas, beings, and levels of awareness. They range from beings with some levels of spiritual power like sprites or fairies, to fully realized beings. They help arouse the energy of wisdom in tantric practitioners.

A purbha is a magical implement. It is the main tool of the Deity Vajrakilaya, a magician-form of the historical figure Padma Sambhava, both of who are hiding here in this deck of cards as well. They are used for many magical feats: wooden ones can be used for healing, and metal ones for exorcism, or transforming the three poisons of attachment, craving, and desire. They can pin down negative energies from the mind-stream of a harmful entity or human person, and dispel dark forces from a society or a single person. They are used in consecrations, meditation, and weather making. They fix space to the earth, like a lightening rod, creating a conduit between them.

49 . *Vajravarahi*

Guiding the Dead Safely through the Bardo



Dakini Vajravarahi has a gift that helps the deceased seek a higher rebirth. It is the *phowa* practice, a prayer that works like a psychic elevator to a higher realm. When a practitioner performs the *phowa*, he

or she fills the space left by the deceased with love, so that they and the departed release their attachments to this earthly place and each other. This helps the deceased raise to a higher energetic state, and a better rebirth.¹²

Vajravarahi glows like a ruby placed on a sunny windowsill. But if you look closer, you will see within her a transparent stream of sapphire blue, thin as the petals on a flower, arising like a ribbon of light-energy from her belly up and out the sahasara chakra at the top of her head. It is like a conduit highway for the soul to travel by after it departs the body. She looks upwards as she knows the teachers from all time are above her like a mass of billowing clouds, at attendance, poised to help.

To practice the phowa is to connect to this lineage of heavenly practitioners of all the ages before you and join in the flow of their work. The practice works because of this connection. When a guru gives initiation, he or she gives you a key to their door. Once you open it, the vast library of knowledge and skill of all practitioners and ages is yours.

Vajravarahi holds a *khatvanga* knife that symbolizes cutting the three poisons; of arrogance, attachment and ignorance at their root. In her right hand she holds a Damaru drum made of two skulls. Its hollow sound symbolizes ridding oneself of ignorance.

50 · *Primordial Buddha Vajradhara*
Brilliant Sky, Illuminating Sun



Vajradhara is as blue as the brilliant sky. His consort is as pure as the white light streaming from the sun. Clothed in the silks and jewels of royalty they sit high above the clouds in the vast expanse of space. His image is often placed at the top of thangka painting because Vajradhara represents the highest state of being.

Vajradhara is the revealer of mysteries and the mystery itself, the source of all manifestations of enlightenment. He is the fusion of both creation and the potential of creation, the state before states exist. Sometimes he appears without a consort and is part of a trio forming the Shakyamuni trinity in Buddhism. This trinity illustrates the three aspects of the Buddha. The first, which is Vajradhara's level, is called *Dharmakaya*, the distillation of form from without form; pre-existence becoming what we think of as "reality." The second is the phase of

Sambhogakaya, the dwelling state where the Buddha is in a paradise, or pure land. The third manifests when, out of compassion, Buddha comes to the earth to help sentient beings, and this is called *Nirmanakaya*.

Out of nothing but awareness, the entire universe manifests, and at the end of time, it reabsorbs again into a single seed of potential, and that potential is Vajradhara.

My Story and My Inspiration

I live at a retreat center called The Movement Center, dedicated to the study of meditation and yoga, where I have studied for 39 years. The halls are lined with rich beautiful antique and contemporary Buddhist thangka art. I was fascinated when I first saw it all—so different from anything “spiritual” that I was used to! You can feel the energy scintillate in them....years of use in monasteries, and painted in an ancient time before electricity and the intensity of technology and rapid change created a whirlwind in our minds. I began painting deities in 2001, inspired by the art around me. Painting focuses my heart and mind on stillness—it’s a really good feeling, experiencing that while making something of beauty. Our practices focus on the technique of kundalini yoga and uses tools from both the Buddhist and Hindu tantric traditions. I had the great good fortune to meet my spiritual teacher Sri Swami Chetanananda Saraswati and to live and study in his ashram. I am also fortunate to have met and receive

teachings from another great teacher, Lama Tsering Wandgu Rimpoche, a lineage holder of the Longchen Nyingthig, Shije, and Chöd traditions. Both men are unlike many alive today.

Swamiji, as his students call him, is a lineage holder in two tantric traditions; Kashmir Shaivism and the Nyingma Buddhist tradition. He mixes both of these worlds in his work and in his teachings. His ashram, founded in 1971, and the central meditation room, contain imagery from both lineages, perhaps one of the few places in the world to do so.

Lama Wangdu, as we call him, learned his Chöd Pacification practice, which is essentially a healing art as well as a path to complete realization, by walking on the traditional pilgrimage to 108 cremation grounds in Tibet and Nepal to practice and meet the spirits in each place, standing firm before them, learning to love them, work with them and understand them, before the time he was 20 years old in the 1950s.

Lama Wangdu and Swamiji have given me guidance in small ways with the form and iconography of my paintings, and in big ways with the lineages I've connected to through them, their dedication and purity in pursuit of spiritual growth, and in the daily practice of meditation and puja.

I received direct transmission training from Sri Swami Chetanananda Saraswati in thangka painting. I also have studied very briefly with Greg Smith of Shambhala and Sudarshan Suwal of Kathmandu, but

in technique I am largely self-taught. I love all of the schools of thangka painting and Hindu art and I mix them in my work along with styles from different centuries. My main interest is to make a beautiful compelling image, more than following the tenants of one style.

I hope my paintings touch not only Buddhist and Hindu practitioners, but also people unfamiliar with this sort of art. In fact, the most fun of all is seeing people who haven't been exposed to the iconography look at what I do. They get awestruck at the details and their circuits get scrambled. (Is that deity really standing on a human being? Why?!) Yes, I thought that too, and began reading about the meanings and the rich, poetic symbolism, full of love.

I begin each painting by researching the meaning of the deity and looking at as many other artists' interpretations as I can. The more I look and read, the more I get a sense of the spirit of the deity. I then create a pencil drawing that I trace onto a prepared cotton canvas coated with a traditional mixture of calcium carbonate and rabbit skin glue. It makes a canvas that is flexible but strong. I then paint the drawn lines with a fine brush as it helps me see what I have drawn. I always end up making more revisions at that point. Then the color begins: I use a mixture of gouache, watercolor paint, and ground mineral paints. Using 22k gold paint is always the delicious finishing touch. The eyes are painted last to awaken the deity.

“...like the faint light of stars, the light of butter lamps which are quickly extinguished, magic things, dewdrops, bubbles, dreams, and clouds of unreal vision, all phenomena arising from causes and conditions are similar to all those.”¹³

History of Thangkas

Thangkas are a style of painting that originated around the 10th century. They represent an amalgamation of several cultures, which illustrates where the art form came from, as Buddhism originated in India and then moved north into Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and the rest of Asia. Various styles arose in each century and from different monastic traditions and regions of Asia. The paintings often use the form of Nepalese deity structure, Indian jewelry and clothing, and landscape elements and floral motifs from classical Chinese painting styles.

Thangka painting arose to illustrate many different needs in Buddhism. They were created not only as art for beauty's sake, but also for use in religious worship, or to inspire, or help practitioners memorize complex visualizations that were part of their spiritual practice. Some are representations of experiences or visions practitioners recorded over time in an effort to explain through art what the energy of life, spiritual growth, and passage into death look like. Images of deities were also used as teaching tools to tell the story of the life of the Buddha, or

to describe events and stories of other historical teachers and great saints, or illustrate myths associated with deities. One could also use the image of a deity as a medium to offer prayers or make requests. Thangkas were painted so that they could be rolled up for storage and transportation, hence their name, as *thankga* means “rolled scroll” in Tibetan.

I love witnessing people seeing thangka art for the first time. I think art is a great tool for opening minds and hearts to different ways of living and thinking about life and the Creative Spirit of God.

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