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Author(s): Megan Thomas
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Buddhist Literatures: Newar Buddhist Literature: The Significance of the Goddess Tārā in Buddhist Literature and Life

Megan Thomas¹

Newar Buddhism is practiced in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. It uses ritual and art to teach, making this area of Buddhism quite unique. Newar Buddhism does not have a large following; it is actually made up of a small population. The goddess Tārā is very popular in this particular area of Buddhism. Tārā is a Buddhist and Hindu goddess who takes many forms and has 108 different names.² She is noted as a popular goddess in Northern Buddhism’s tradition.³ Tārā’s name has been roughly translated as ‘saviress,’ ‘star,’ and ‘she who leads across,’ because her role is to encourage others on their path to enlightenment.⁴ She helps individuals attain enlightenment and is a compassionate goddess.⁵ Tārā is a “universal mother who nurtures, assists, and protects all seekers on the spiritual path. She cherishes each being as dearly as an only child and, driven by the fierce commitment of a mother’s heart, exerts herself in myriad ways to relieve the suffering of the world. No work of art can capture her luminous, magical beauty.”⁶ Such is the description of Tārā in Miranda Eberle Shaw’s “Buddhist Goddesses of India.” Shaw’s description expresses attributes typical for a goddess: feminine, beautiful, nurturing, and protective. Tārā is described in such a way that it is made clear no mortal female could possess all of her characteristics; she is described as “ethereal yet regal, delicate yet majestic,”⁷ suggesting there are very human aspects to her character, and also very conflicting characteristics. Tārā is not just one character or personality. She takes many forms across all sects of Buddhism: “Tārā is mentioned in many works on Buddhist history or culture in South Asia, showing her significance to many Buddhist people. An old Newar Buddhist greeting, “Tāremām,” translates to “I take refuge in Tārā,”⁸ indicating that Tārā was a valued deity whose name was used in many social exchanges in everyday life, and also her significance specifically in the Newar religion.

Tārā is a significant goddess in the Buddhist religion for men, women and children; she embodies female empowerment making her an especially important deity for Buddhist women. Her empowering abilities

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¹ Megan Thomas is studying History of Religions and Anthropology at UTM. She is an English-Canadian who lives in Grand Bend, Ontario.
⁶ Shaw, 306.
⁷ Ibid., 307.
⁸ Lewis, 107.
continue to be noted today. She is included in speeches by the Dalai Lama showing Buddhism as a modern religion which empowering women worldwide. At a conference in 1989, the Dalai Lama illustrated Tārā’s importance across all areas of Buddhism, and her relevance to our western world. His speech concentrated on the priority of feminism and equality:

There is a true feminist movement in Buddhism that relates to the goddess Tārā. Following her cultivation of bodhicitta, the bodhisattva’s motivation, she looked upon the situation of those striving towards full awakening and she felt that there were too few people who attained Buddhahood as women. So she vowed, “I have developed bodhicitta as a woman. For all my lifetimes along the path I vow to be born as a woman, and in my final lifetime when I attain Buddhahood, then, too, I will be a woman.”

This quote in itself could summarize the significance of a powerful female figure in a male-dominated religion, but it does so without attacking Buddhism as a religion, and instead embraces the idea of equality. Tārā does not complain about the fact that more men attain Nirvana, but instead argues that women should feel as though they are just as capable. For the Dalai Lama to use his influence in such a way really brings the Buddhist religion into a more modern time, and spreading the word to Westerners who find Eastern religion and philosophy very intriguing. Especially with the idea of Eastern religion becoming more relevant and appealing in our current society, the Dalai Lama’s comments almost sell the religion of Buddhism to Western listeners. I think many Westerners are becoming more and more aware of equality in everyday life as well as in religion, and although I think equality and female empowerment is mostly known and acknowledged across South Asia and Buddhist countries, the Dalai Lama uses the good of Tārā to promote his religion around the world. Without the goddess Tārā, this idea of female power and potential may not have been translated as well, and would be harder to relate to for modern day women.

Tārā is a main character in the story “The Vrata kātha”, a popular tale in Newar Buddhism, which establishes Tārā’s views on being reborn as a man to reach enlightenment. It is quoted that Tārā said the following to hearer sangha, as he predicted she would take Buddha form: “there are many practitioners in male form, and there are numerous enlightened beings in male form. Bringing benefits towards sentient beings entirely in female form has almost become like ‘stars in day time.’” So, she made a firm resolve that “I am going to serve the mother sentient beings in my female form.” The quote seems like a really modern concept as women today, and in the past few decades have taken on roles thought of as traditional male jobs. In more recent years there has been less of a gap between what is a role for a male or what is traditional for females and what Tārā says in the Vrata kātha is something we could hear from females today. It is intriguing that Tārā was always so empowering for Buddhist women, and upfront about it too. Because Tārā was always so proud to be a woman, I think it helped create the importance of her rituals in stories in domestic life, especially for the Newar Buddhist women. Her story “The Vrata kātha” illustrates that she not only empowered herself by stating what she believed was the

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right way to be treated as a Buddhist woman, but also empowered other females who can follow by her example and whose path to equality has been made easier through Tārā’s stories. Her significance in Newar Buddhism is not just because she is popular among women, she is just as important to the Buddhist men. As in the above quote, Tārā does not dismiss men, but simply shows that not all men are perfect or religious. She entreats women to have faith in themselves in order to become more religious, and achieve such things as multiple lifetimes and enlightenment.

Women have always had rights in Buddhism. Not only did women have freedom, but also men did not have any issues with that freedom. L.S. Dewaraja in her study of women in Buddhism writes:

In early Buddhist literature one sees a free intermingling of the sexes. The celibate monks and nuns had separate quarters, yet the cloister was not cut off from the rest of the world. It is recorded that the Buddha had long conversations with his female disciples. The devout benefactress Visakha frequented the monastery decked in all her finery, and accompanied by a maid servant she attended to the needs of the monks. Her clothes and ornaments were the talk of the town, yet neither the Buddha nor the monks dissuaded her from wearing them. It was after she developed in insight and asceticism that she voluntarily relinquished her ornaments.  

Dr. Dewaraja writes an extensive paper on the rights of Buddhist throughout history, a topic not written about in great detail since the 1930’s by Miss I.B Horner. Her text was called “Women Under Primitive Buddhism.” This contradicts my previous statements that talking about women’s issues in the western world makes Buddhism appear to be a more modern religion, because the title uses the word ‘primitive.’ Women have generally had more rights for longer in the eastern world, but I merely say it because I know from experience that many westerners think of eastern religion as more of a philosophy than a religion, and often do not take it as seriously as their own traditions, nor do they explore social dynamics as much as the religious traditions themselves. However, since the western world is experiencing more and more changes regarding the topic of sexism and equality, I do think it is a good time to express how Buddhists have been doing things for years to help women everywhere understand what equality is and means. I think it is due to goddesses like Tārā and placing women in higher rankings than before that Buddhist people can justify the fair treatment of their women.

Sir Charles Bell was a British Civil Servant who assisted the Dalai Lama during his exile from Tibet. Bell stated that his assistance to the Dalai Lama was "perhaps the chief reason why the British name stands high in Tibet." In 1928 he said of Tibetan women: "they are not kept in seclusion as are Indian women. Accustomed to mix with the other sex throughout their lives, they are at ease with men and can hold their own as well as any women in the world... the solid fact remains that in Buddhist countries women

12 Ibid.
hold a remarkably good position. Burma, Ceylon and Tibet exhibit the same picture. Written as issues surrounding women’s rights were coming into play in many European and North American societies, Bell evidently saw something remarkable in the way women were treated in Tibet, and concluded that from a European point of view, it was likely that Buddhist women did not feel there was a significant difference in their standing compared to males.

Despite their elevated position, women in Buddhism still face challenges. As the Dalai Lama noted in his story about Tārā, a central issue for her was that a woman must be reborn as a man in order to attain enlightenment. Despite sexual equality in Burma, Buddhist women there pray “I pray that I may be reborn as a male in a future existence.” The Buddhist religion continues to maintain such traditions that promote inequality. Dewaraja argues that the central doctrine of Karma and Rebirth have been “interpreted to prove the inherent superiority of the male.” For example, to be born as a woman is evidence of one’s bad Karma in a previous life and “thus the subordination of women is given a religious sanction.” Women can be equal to men in one lifetime, but to reach enlightenment they are still a step below their male counterparts. Women are led to believe they should be the best woman they can be in order to be reborn a man. In Sri Lanka as Dewaraja notes, meritorious Buddhist women often “aspire to be redeemed from womanhood and be reborn as a man in future.” Though, it is important to understand that to become enlightened you generally must live thousands of lifetimes, it must nevertheless make some women feel a disappointment when they are not content in their own being. Tārā said that “for all my lifetimes along the path I vow to be born as a woman, and in my final lifetime when I attain Buddhahood, then, too, I will be a woman” I think this gives Buddhist people some hope about changes in their religion. Although Tārā’s stories may be old, changes are still in progress, which makes her tales more resounding and realistic than before.

The Tārā Pūjā, or ‘Liberation from Sorrow,’ is a prayer for help. It is not just a prayer significant to women, rather, it is a prayer designed to help everyone. Although Tārā is a role model and leader in feminism, the prayer also makes Tārā accessible for men and children. In this prayer, Tārā is known as ‘the rescuer.’ She rescues Buddhists from the eight outer fears (lions, elephants, fire, snakes, thieves, water, bondage, and evil spirits) and the eight inner fears (pride, ignorance, anger, jealousy, wrong views, attachment, miserliness, and deluded doubts). The Kadampa Buddhism website says, “If we recite the twenty-one verses of praise we shall receive inconceivable benefits. These praises are very powerful because they are Sutra, the actual words of Buddha. It is good to recite them as often as we can”. Green Tārā is so quick to respond to the Tārā Pūjā because green is associated with the air/wind element. Green Tārā is also associated with enlightenment and abundance, as well as compassion and

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15 Dalai Lama, Worlds in Harmony.
17 Dewaraja.
18 Ibid.
19 Dalai Lama, Worlds in Harmony.
21 Ibid.
ability to help others. She is also a ‘wisdom Buddha’ and this helps her efficiency and is why people recite the twenty-one verses of praise so often.

The Tārā Pūjā can also help one increase wealth, excel in one’s studies, and achieve success in one’s career, gain good health and energy, obtain good rebirths in future lives, and quickly attain enlightenment. The mantra of Green Tārā: OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SVAHA translates to “I prostrate to Tārā the Liberator, Mother of all the Victorious Ones”. The use of these words suggests women are the Victorious Ones and it explains the many things Tārā does to help women in need, or to give them something positive to think of, encouraging them to achieve more.

The Tārā Pūjā is special because it works at different levels, for example; inner obstacles hinder the development of out wisdom and compassion, which in turn create external obstacles. By relying on Tārā, the enlightened activities manifest in order to help sentient beings accomplish their goals. Because Tārā is especially helpful for women, the Tārā Pūjā encourages them to achieve their goals in the same way any man would. Despite these goals being ‘temporary’, and enlightenment being the ultimate goal, the Tārā Pūjā can quickly resolve issues you may be facing, regarding wealth, health or success. Tārā’s teachings put things into perspective for Buddhists while allowing these temporary goals to still be achievable. She makes these goals (often materialistic) less frowned upon and they seem more accepted as she also teaches what is more important and what will help attain Nirvana to reach the ultimate goal for Buddhists.

The Tārā vrata is another ritual involving the goddess Tārā. Vratas are rituals that last one or more days, and they are always priest-led and lay-sponsored. Vratas are for devotion to powerful divinities; such as Tārā, but can also be used to venerate celestial bodhisattvas. There are many aspects to a vrata such as long segments of reading stories, fasting, declaring faith and assembling offerings to the deity being praised. Vratas are especially significant because it is a form of ritual that has actually been mostly recorded throughout history. In our western culture we are not used to having much ritual, (we mostly study text, and our western religions are text based) and generally do not think it is necessary to study this important aspect of religion.

The Tārā Vrata does not have a set date in the calendar, although it is generally performed in the holy month of Gunlā. Particularly in Newar Buddhism, everybody is welcome at a vrata and it is performed on a voluntary basis. It is recommended that a young person perform the Tārā Vrata. Tārā is a healing goddess and the vrata will help extend one’s life expectancy. It can also be performed when a person is

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23 Ibid.
24 Ananda Dharma Center “Knowledge Library: A Brief Description of Arya Tara”.
http://gadensamtenling.org/PDFs/Text/TaraPuja.PDF.
26 Lewis, 91.
27 Ibid., 89.
28 Ibid., 90.
29 Shaw, 351.
elderly and seriously ill, and since women generally take care of the ill, this ceremony is often their responsibility and if they cannot be at the ceremony, it is done in their name. Women often perform two offerings for an absent husband. To celebrate Ārya Tārā (Green Tārā), women often wear green and wear handmade jewelry stained green with homemade vegetable dye.

The Tārā Vrata is a complex ritual that has many intricate steps. The preparation of the Tārā mandala is key to the steps and mantras that follow. After the mandala is completed, a ritual cleansing takes place. Before worshiping the Tārā mandala itself, participants perform specific actions:

After this, all those who are performing the Ārya Tārā Vrata may be asked to sit in an orderly row and to construct mandalas before them. Have them receive the pañcagavya purification and make votive offerings. Have them perform a gurumandala pūjā. Make them worship the mata lamp and clay caityas made with their own hands. Have them duly perform mandala pūjā of the Buddha, Dharma, and Samgha. Have them take refuge in the triratna by repeating in chorus ‘Ratna triyam me shāranam’ three times.

This is just the aspect that takes place in between the preparing of the mandala and the reciting of the mantras themselves. The vrata takes quite a long time, finishing by a riverbank with sacred water and sand, but of course going home to have a feast ends the entire ritual. Women are usually responsible for the feast. They prepare the food and host from their own home. It is also important to note that the Tārā vrata can take place in any temple courtyard, but there are preferred areas when dedicating a ritual to Tārā. These include Itum Bāhā in Nepal and the Tārā Tīrtha on the bank of the Bāgmati River at Śānkhu, Nepal.

Tārā Tīrtha is an especially sacred spot as it is the place where the Vrata kātha took place. The Vrata kātha is a story about Tārā, told in the Hindu and Buddhist religion, which indicates her capabilities. It is significant because it is an element of the Tārā vrata itself, and the story goes alongside the ritual. The Vrata kātha begins with a Brāhman (from the highest of the four castes) man named Gunākar who had a son named Dhanākar. Dhanākar was married to a woman of high status but he ate forbidden foods, visited prostitutes and drank alcohol. His father tried to stop him from doing these things, but Dhanākar would not stop. When Gunākar died, his son’s habits got worse and worse, while his wife remained faithful and kind. Finally she became impatient with the way he treated her and told him that he should not do all of these bad things. He got angry and sent her away after beating her. She believed it was because she had bad karma, and left for the forest where she thought she should kill herself. She met a sage in the forest who said “Oh gentle lady, whose wife are you? What is your name? Why have you come to this forest? Who is here escorting you? Who have you come with? Tell me the truth.” She told him what had happened, and that she had thoughts of suicide. The sage told her that human life was
precious, and that it takes hard work to become a human in the first place. He said she ought to pray to
the goddess Ārya Tārā. He told her committing suicide was bad, and explained with a story that told of a
lady who committed suicide and was "doomed to hell and subjected untold sufferings." The sage told
the lady to go to the bathing spot of Ārya Tārā, a holy tīrtha, and offer prayers to the goddess. These
prayers to Tārā helped the lady deal with her suicidal thoughts and encouraged her to appreciate her
life. She asked how the Tārā tīrtha came about, and the sage told a second story. This next story spoke
of how Tārā had released Brahmā, Visnu, Maheshvara and Indra from their miseries. The lady was
enthused by hearing this and climbed the hill to reach the Tārā tīrtha. She bathed and said heartfelt
prayers, so Ārya Tārā appeared in her green form and blessed her. The goddess then vanished, leaving
the lady behind. She decided to devote her life to the Tārā tīrtha and lived upon fruit and water,
meditating and offering prayers to Tārā. When the lady died she was transported to Sukhāvatī,
Amitābha Buddha’s paradise.\footnote{Lewis, 104-105.}

Although that was only a short version of what the story tells, it summarizes the compassion Tārā feels
and how she helps those who need her. The story is important because it is essentially three stories in
one: the first main story, the second story of the woman who committed suicide and the third story of
the generosity of the goddess, Tārā. Prayers to Tārā encourage the importance of human life and the
danger of suicide. They encourage the penitent woman to become more religious and to appreciate the
life she has in order to gain the reward of life in Buddha’s paradise. The Vrata kātha teaches women not
to blame karma for everything in their life, and to not use suicide as a way out of a difficult life. It
encourages women who are struggling to find religion and to think about its rewards before making any
rash decisions in hard times.

I believe that Tārā plays a hugely important role for women in both the Hindu and Buddhist religion. Her
strength and courage in her speeches on the empowerment of women is something to inspire people
globally, whether they are religious or not. Her stories such as the Vrata kātha and rituals like pūjā’s and
vratas, which are a necessary part of Buddhist life, show us that a powerful woman is both appreciated
and worshipped in many aspects.

Tārā’s assertion that she was willing to wait and continue to be reborn until she can attain
enlightenment as a woman was an honourable and brave act which certainly inspires me, as I would
imagine it inspires many Buddhist women of all sects and castes. I think she is a goddess everybody can
look up to, both men and women, in any walk of life.