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GODDESS TARA, THANGKAS, AND THE USE OF COLOUR SYMBOLISM

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Abstract

Goddess *Tara* is one of the central figures in the Buddhist pantheon. Appearing first as the consort of *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*, and her gradual growth to a female *Bodhisattva* and as the female Buddha, is testament to her growing popularity within the Buddhist folds. The Goddess of Compassion and Perfected Wisdom manifests herself in various forms to guide and protect her followers. Goddess *Tara* iconographically is often portrayed seated or standing on a lotus pedestal, with an *utpala* in her left hand and her right hand in the *varada mudra*. In paintings and murals *Tara* is manifested in various colours to highlight her various forms and roles, from a peaceful saviour to that of a wrathful deity and everything in between. Of her various forms, Green *Tara* and White *Tara* are the most well-known and often visually invoked in Buddhist meditation. Green *Tara* is the manifestation of her role as the saviour and White *Tara* is her form as the Goddess of Long Life and Healing. All five major colours or *panca-varna* (white, yellow, red, blue and green) are seen in the various manifestations of *Tara* and her worship. There is also *Ugra Tara* or Black *Tara*. The use of colours to awaken one's senses, increase concentration while also visualizing *Tara*, is a common method of meditation in the *Vajrayana* fold of Buddhism, alongside the chanting of her mantra. This paper aims to understand the use and importance of the colour symbolism, its association with the iconology of Goddess *Tara* and her visualization in Buddhist Meditation practices, with special focus on *Thangka* Paintings, which portray the various emanations and depictions of the Goddess and is more often used as an aid in meditation process. The paper to hopes to further

the understanding of the use of art in the transmission of ideas and concepts as notably seen in the case of Buddhist art.

Keywords: *Tara, Thangka, Tibet, Buddhist Painting, Colour Symbolism*

Introduction

Early Buddhist art of paintings emerged to portray the Buddhist way of life and to help in upholding moral and ritual practices. It is only later that these paintings became tools for aiding both monks and laity in spiritual meditation. The paintings functioned as mediums for its viewers to look within themselves to find peace and happiness, thereby encouraging the path of the Buddha and Enlightenment, and guiding the followers towards spiritual elevation. Palm leaf manuscripts with Buddha's lessons and related visual illustrations aided in the spread of Buddhist philosophy and teachings from India all over Asia. Thangka is a type of Buddhist scroll painting, which can be rolled up and easily transported.

This paper aims to understand the use of the colour symbolism in Thangka paintings and its association with the worship of Goddess Tara and her visualisation. The paper hopes to further the understanding of the use of art in the transmission of ideas and concepts as notably seen in the case of Buddhist art.

Thangka Paintings and Colour Symbolism

It is believed that Thangka painting started in Nepal, and spread then to Tibet, along with the spread of Buddhism to the region around the late sixth century CE [Richardson 2003]. There is a myth of a Nepalese Princess marrying a Tibetan Prince, which is attributed to the spread of the Thangka art

form from Nepal to Tibet [Shaw 2015]. The literal translation of the word Thangka would be a "recorded message", which is intended for the practitioner, in this case, a Buddhist monk or practitioner, who will use the painting as an aid to teach, in meditation and as for ritual purpose and visualisation of the deity [Wein 2016]. Thangka Paintings flourished between the 8th century to the 12th century CE in the Tibet region, when artists from Bihar were invited by Tibetan rulers, to paint and create manuscripts and scrolls [Santiago 1999]. This exchange of ideas, concepts, and objects helped develop and evolve the painting style over time, and with the decline of Buddhism in India, Tibet became one the custodian of this tradition of Buddhist paintings and scrolls [Santiago 1999].

The *Aryamanjusrimulakalpa* mentions 'religious paintings on cloth,' which could refer to Thangka paintings [Tucci 1949]. An 11th-century CE record of *Atisa* mentions, that when *Atisa* arrived in Tibet, he received numerous gifts, among which was a woven Thangka (*Takdrub* Thangka) of an eleven-headed *Avalokitesvara* [Santiago 1999]. A Song Dynasty source (10th to 13th century CE) mentions priests of Nalanda University painting images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas on cloth [Tucci 1949]. The earliest Thangka Painting found however is from the 12th century CE. *Atisa* is the one known for bringing the idea of *Tara* and her 21 forms to Tibet, where she is often depicted in Thangka paintings [Kumar and Sharama, 2018].

Thangka paintings usually take a long time to prepare, from a couple of months to even years. It normally takes a master Thangka Painter to complete a painting one to two years [Santiago 1999]. It should be highlighted that typically in the case of Thangka Paintings, there is no space for the pursuit of creativity, as the painter is supposed to possess the knowledge of the scriptures and treatises and be absorbed in the state of meditation during the

process. The painter is supposed to have cleansed his body and mind, as well as the surroundings where he or she will work [Santiago 1999].

There are diverse types of Thangkas, based on their subject matter, materials used, function and colours used. Thangkas created by painting on a canvas are called a *Tsonthang* Thangka in the Tibetan language, and have further subdivisions based on the colours used and its sources [Santiago 1999]. A *Chutson* Thangka is a type where the colours used are derived from vegetable and mineral pigments. Similarly, a *Nakthang* Thangka has a black background, and the figures are painted in gold or red colours [Jackson and Jackson 1984]. In the case of *Tshalthang* Thangka, the drawing is done in golden or black colours, while the background is red. For *Serthang* Thangka, the background is golden, and the drawings are in red [Jackson and Jackson 1984]. The main painting is enclosed by two bands or borders which are often either red or yellow and is known as '*Aja ma.'* This border symbolises or acts as a doorway to the Thangka painting, and thus represents the edifice where the deity resides [Tucci 1949].

In Tibetan Buddhism, the five elements are important and represented in art through assorted colours, shapes, and symbols [Zhang 2013]. This expression of colour symbolism is seen in Thangka paintings, with the colour yellow (square) used for earth, blue (circle) for water, red (triangle) for fire, green (rectangle) for air, and white (semi-circle) for space [Wangyal 2002]. Similarly, cardinal directions are also linked with colours and elements – North is associated with golden colour and earth, West with fire and red, South with wind and blue, East with water and White, and the middle area with space and surrounded by the other four [Zhang 2013]. It should be remembered that Thangkas are to be read with the top side representing the direction of the West and the right-hand side representing the direction of the North [Zhang 2013].

[Fig.1]

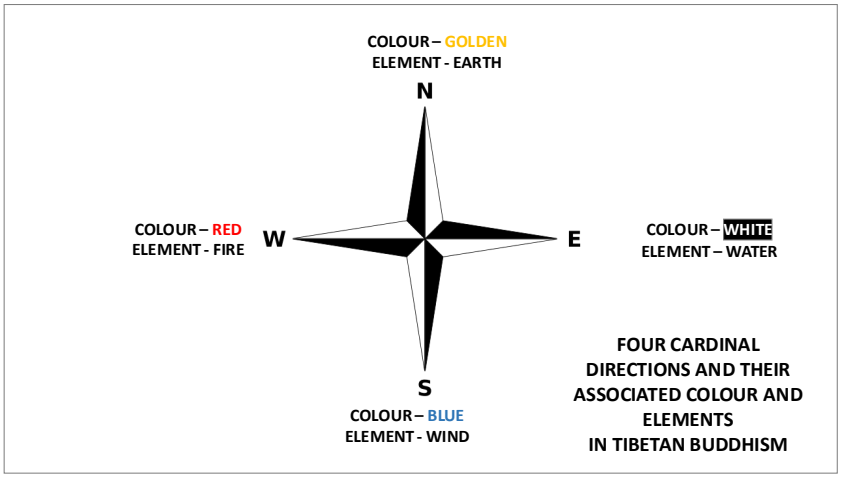

Fig 1. Four Cardinal Directions and their associated colours and elements

The elements in certain ritual practices and meditation are seen in association with parts of the human body along with their specific colours. For example, the flesh of the body is earth, the bodily fluids and blood are water, fire is the electrical energy and metabolic heat of the body, the air is the oxygen and other gases, and, finally the space is denoted as the area occupied by the body, and the space in the body [Wangyal, 2002]. This association with the human body, and more often the body of Buddha, expands to the association of the elements and colours with each of the Buddha families – *Vairocana* with water, *Ratnasambhava* with earth, *Amitabha* with fire, *Amoghasiddhi* with wind and *Akshobya* with space [Egan 2011]. In the *Kalachakra* tradition, there is a slight difference, with *Vairocana* linked to earth, *Ratnasambhava* with fire, *Amitabha* with water, *Amoghasiddhi* with wind and *Akshobya* with space [Gyatso 2004]. There is some variation in the association of the colours with the elements, and the main reason for this may be due to the incorporation of previous traditions and associations into the folds of the new representation

patterns created [Zhang 2013]. The variations occur also due to there being different traditions, rituals, and meditation practices. Such is the case for water being linked to luminous blue rather than white, due to its focus on such instances being on meditation practices [Wangyal 2002]. [Fig 2]

BUDDHA FAMILY AND THEIR ASSOCIATED COLOURS, ELEMENTS, CONSORTS AND CARDINAL DIRECTIONS

NAME OF BUDDHA	DIRECTION	COLOUR	ELEMENT	CONSORT	IN KALACHAKRA TRADITION – ELEMENTS
AKSHOBHYA	EAST	BLUE	SPACE	LOCHANA	SPACE
RATNASAMBHAVA	SOUTH	YELLOW	EARTH	MAMAKI	FIRE
AMITABHA	WEST	RED	FIRE	PANDARAVASINI	WATER
AMOGHASIDDHI	NORTH	GREEN	WIND	SAMAYA TARA	WIND
VAIROCHANA	CENTRAL	WHITE	WATER	AKASHADHATIS	EARTH

Fig. 2. Buddha Family and their Cardinal Directions, Colours, Elements and Consorts

In the case of Thangkas, used for visualisation of deities, and as aids in meditation, the recognition of the elements and their associations is important [Zhang 2013]. Thangkas are ritual objects and are often placed in shrines and place of worship, in the house of the possessor. To be in the presence of a Thangka is equivalent to be in the presence of the divine [Santiago 1999]. The Tibetan term “mton-grol” means that when one views and meditates upon a Thangka, they are transported to the Divine world. Thus Thangkas, do not only aid in prayer and meditation, but are also pray upon itself [Santiago 1999]. The presence of evidence of consecration and the

deity's mantra is indicative of a Thangka's authenticity and functioning as an object of ritual [Wein 2016].

In Tantric meditation practices, a form of the deity is present in front to visualise and mediate upon [Frawley 1994]. The deity has a subtle body form of mediation or contemplation and appears in specific colours, making specific gestures, with specific items in their hands and with ornaments and other paraphernalia [Wein 2016]. These details and descriptions are available to the artist who made the painting and to the practitioner who through the image of the deity aims to meditate and commune with the deity and develop the attributes portrayed to be in the possession of the deity in themselves [Frawley 1994].

However, due to the existence of a variation of tradition and schools and sub-schools of thoughts, considerable variation in colours, properties associations, shapes and elements is found, with emphasis given to different texts or practices or schools of thought [Egan 2011]. In addition, there remains the factor of expression of a certain element or associated idea, and the presence of space for interchangeability of the colours or elements to create variations to serve different ritual or functional needs of the painting [Egan 2011]. Elements can be combined as well to make a new element or symbolise a different concept and attribute, this means, creating the space for a plethora of sub-categories, such as earth/fire, wind/fire, air/water, etc. [Egan 2011]. While this complicates the much simpler associations of earlier practices, the wider acceptance and veneration by the practitioners testifies to its acceptability; and acknowledges that there is a need for prior knowledge in the subject and the art for it to function completely. In the absence of this awareness and knowledge, the painting no longer remains a sacred object but is converted to an object of art [Wein 2016].

Thangka Paintings and Buddhist Meditative Practices

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In meditation, the aid of the painted visualisation is needed as opposed to using one's imagination or self-visualisation, is because at that stage, the meditator has not been able to rise above their worldly bindings and ego, and therefore, they do not possess vision and awareness to envisage the enlightened form of the deity and the divine reality [Wein 2016]. It should be mentioned that there is no differentiation between monks and lay people in the practice of such ritual, meditative practices [Wein 2016].

The Thangka paintings typically contain images of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Mandalas, both peaceful and wrathful deities, and depictions of historical events [Tucci 1949]. Thangka Paintings characteristically has a deity from the Vajrayana Buddhist fold and is most likely to be used in a Vajrayana Buddhist ritual practice [Wein 2016]. Each deity has their distinct qualities and elements as part of their iconography and are painted with those aspects [Wein 2016]. The basic concept of the visual illustrations is to aid the practitioner, to visualise those specific qualities in themselves and in the process become one with the deity who is depicted in the Thangka painting. In addition, while meditating on the image and the qualities they embody,

chanting their individual hymns or mantra also acts as an aid to further develop and highlight the specific qualities or ideals in oneself [Wein 2016].

The depiction of Buddha and Bodhisattvas in Thangka Paintings are popular, as they act as guides, helping others attain enlightenment and peace, by helping the viewer, develop in themselves, the very unique and positive characteristics they personified in the painted canvases. Each deity and character that was depicted and portrayed in the paintings, had their own unique qualities, and attributes [Wein 2016]. The depiction and portrayal of Goddess Tara is commonly seen in Thangka paintings.

In Tantric meditation practices, a form of the deity is present in front to visualise and mediate upon [Frawley 1994]. The deity has a subtle body form of mediation or contemplation and appears in specific colours, making specific gestures, with specific items in their hands and with ornaments and other paraphernalia [Wein 2016]. These details and descriptions are available to the artist who made the painting and to the practitioner who through the image of the deity aims to meditate and commune with the deity and develop the attributes portrayed to be in the possession of the deity in themselves [Frawley 1994].

Tantric worship is a type of inner worship, where the attributes and abilities of the divine deity is envisioned and manifested within the self, through meditation, for self-generation and development [Frawley 1994]. Irrespective of the various forms and styles of practices, the base objective and aim of all of them are the same, and thus, the practitioner is free to use any of the texts or methods, of their choosing, in the mediation process [Frawley 1994]. Usually, advanced, or experienced practitioners, memorise the text of their choice beforehand, to not get distracted between the text and the image, during the ritual engagement with the Thangka [Wein 2016]. Having stated so, it is important to note that certain basic knowledge is required for the

proper practice, such as to consecrate the place of practice, making specific mudras and postures, knowing which direction to face and so on. For this reason, referring the texts and having an expert to guide the practitioner in the process in necessary [Wein 2016].

Thangka Paintings have an inbuilt potentiality to aid in the process of transformation [Wein 2016]. This transformation is seen in the case of both the artist or person making the scroll painting, and the patron or the meditator or the viewer, who is the custodian of this ritual object or artefact. For the expert artist, the space of the work, the tools, the paint, and the canvas itself is sacred, and he or she paints the canvas while he meditates on the process. The act of creation, the act of devotion and the self-awareness that the artist in the process, as he or she meditates on the very ideals he depicts on the canvas, makes thangka not a simple work of art but a ritual object [Santiago 1999]. The viewer or practitioner then views this image, which contains the meditation of the painter as well as the unchanged, ascribed visual depiction of the deity, and meditates on it to transform his mind. The thangka thus acts as a transformative journey tool and aids in the process of self-development [Wein 2016].

Thangkas were used for widely four kinds of religious purposes through meditation [Wein 2016]. Firstly, as a means of gaining merit or overcoming an obstacle. In such a case, the practitioner is most likely to be advised to meditate and create a thangka painting of his own, following strict and rigid rules and processes of ‘merit-making rituals’ [Wein 2016]. Secondly, as an assistance through transmigration for the deceased. In such cases, the family or close relative of the deceased, meditates or makes a thangka for the benefit of the one who has passed away [Shaw 2015]. Third, as an aid in visualisation for meditation. The practitioner used the painting of the deity to visualise the deity, meditate, as a point of focus, and as an object to pray upon

[Shaw 2015]. And finally, for elaborate visualisation practices common in Tantric Buddhist meditative practices [Wein 2016]. In such cases, the thangkas act as 'body supports' or '*sku rten'* in Tibetan, which means that Thangkas has transformative powers to help transport the practitioner to the divine realm and help transform them as they visualise, envision and cultivate the attributes seen in the painting within themselves [Wein 2016]. Thangka is thus, "a psychological and symbolic apparatus" for the meditator, as the paintings uphold the Vajrayana notion of liberation through vision [Wein 2016]. This notion of vision is based on the interactions and concepts of religious symbolism and iconography of the deity [Morgan 2012].

This duality of object and divinity, inherent in Thangkas, as seen in the cases of '*sku rten,*' highlights the role of the painted scrolls in the overall soteriological notions of Buddhism, as the physical object that is a Thangka painting transcends the physical form to deliver the divine and the spiritual experience [Wein 2016].

Goddess Tara in Thangka Paintings

Buddhist Goddess Tara is one of the most popular female figures in the Buddhist pantheon, is widely worshipped and has numerous ritual and Tantric practices dedicated to her [Frawley 1994]. Tara is looked upon as a guiding star and mother who will guide in times of need and is compassionate to all [Frawley 1994]. Tara is the goddess of Perfected Wisdom [Shaw 2015]. The first text to introduce Tara is the *Manjusrimulakalpa* [Shaw 2015]. There are various stories about the origin of Tara. Among those narratives, one of the popular myths states that Tara arose from the compassionate tears of Bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara*. A further story explains the presence of various emanations of Tara, through the narrative that out of Avalokitesvara's left

eye's teardrop was born Green Tara and White Tara was born out of his right eye's teardrop [Shaw 2015].

Goddess Tara is often found depicted in Thangka Paintings as the central deity, because of her popularity in Tibet. Her protective, maternal, and peace-making nature makes her easier to approach and pray to [Shaw 2015]. Of the various possible emanations of Tara, she is mostly known for her twenty-one forms, which are mostly venerated, worshipped and depicted in art. However, there exist five different systems of the twenty-one Taras, as described and devised by different writers and scholars within Buddhism [Wein 2016]. Of these five, noteworthy are the systems devised by the 9th-century Kashmiri scholar *Suryagupta*, and that of monk *Atisa*, who travelled to Tibet [Wein 2016]. The descriptions and rules of depicting Tara are mentioned in the *Sadhanmala* [Ghosh 1980]. The green form of Tara, Green Tara or *Khadiravani* Tara, as she is known, is mentioned in sadhana number eighty-nine of the *Sadhanamala*, which is a compilation of around 300 sadhanas, authored by numerous religious scholars and monks [Wein 2016].

Tara's root prayer in her Tantra, found in *Taramulakalpa* (a 7th century CE text), describes her capability and willingness to take on any form, whenever needed, to come to the aid of the distressed and to guide lost people through the difficult terrains of life [Wein 2016]. The *Taramulakalpa* text is a compilation of ritual practices like mantra recitations, mandalas, painting on cloth, and offerings and embodies the Mahayana and Action Tantra repository of knowledge and practice [Shaw 2015].

Goddess Tara's motherhood is represented through her dual characteristics of compassion (*karuna)* and transcended wisdom (*prajna*) [Shaw 2015]. She is universal in her beauty and compassion, and so according to narratives, the distressed person calling for Tara's saving grace does not need to be her disciple or even a Buddhist. Tara is said to emanate uncountable

forms and manifestations of herself in every colour, to spread mercy and compassion among all living beings [Shaw 2015].

Tara means a saviour, who will come to the aid of those in distress and help them cross the difficult and dangerous ocean of life [Shaw 2015]. In Tantric traditions, Tara is seen as the purifying force of the vital breaths, which provides safety and life-giving energy and force, and can save and bring back people who are on the brink of death [Shaw 2015].

In Thangka Paintings, Tara's Buddhahood is depicted in her *sambhoga-kaya*, which manifests her divine form and reflects her epiphanies [Shaw 2015]. As per Tantric understanding of Buddhahood, Tara is universal and contains all living beings in herself [Rinpoche 1999]. To portray her countless forms, and her omnipresence, often in a Thangka the triptych format is used, with multiple versions of Tara depicted in a single canvas, to highlight her essence of being one with reality and space [Shaw 2015].

Colours of Tara

There are innumerable iconographic manifestations of Tara. While Green and White Tara are the most venerated and popular, she emanates in shades of rainbow, in association with a wide range of moods and functions [Shaw 2015]. [Fig 3] Tara appears in multiple colours, from her green, white, to yellow, red and blue. As stated earlier, Tara is always ready to help those in distress, and so her forms are born out of the need and penchants of the ones in distress, and she has so many variations in her 'expressions of divinity' [Shaw 2015]. Her iconography can have a change as small as the hand which holds the lotus, or the colour of the lotus itself [Shaw 2015].

Fig 3: Lower Register of the Chakrasamvara Mandala, 1100 CE, Nepal, Accession No. 1995.233, MET

[The lower register seen shows the five forms of goddess Tara.]

As mentioned earlier, in Tibetan Buddhism there are 21 forms of Tara (Atisha's 21 forms of Tara). She is associated with the five sacred and cardinal colours of the Dhyani Buddhas and appears as their consorts or shakti. Sarvajnamitra, a poet from Kashmir, while describing Tara mentions that she is "red as the sun, blue as sapphire, white as foam of the ocean and as brilliant as the sparkling of gold" [Kumara and Sharama, 2018].

Fig 4: White Tara and Green Tara, 1450-1500, Western Tibet, Accession No. 2012.460, MET

Green Tara

Tara is most often depicted in the colour green, which is associated with her nature and actions, as a goddess who is quick to respond, and fast in her movement.[Fig 4] Her link to the wind element is coordinated with her position in the Yoga Tantra class of the Action Family, and her link to *Amoghasiddhi*, who is linked with the element of wind as well, as stated before [Wein 2016].

The *108 Praises of Tara* describes and highlights the role and powers of Goddess Tara. The stanza mentioned, also mentions the colours associated with the iconography of Tara.

You hold a blue lotus in your hand and say, "Fear not!

I will protect all beings! I will ferry all beings.

Across the terrifying ocean of existence!"

Another line mentions her as being depicted in green – *"Your body is emerald, green, blazing with splendour, invincible"* [Shaw 2015].

Tara is linked with *Amitabha* Buddha as well, who is depicted in a seated position on her crown. This is because of *Amitabha's* association with immortality and her role as the remover of obstacles, including death [Wein 2016]. Tara is said to embody the body, speech, and mind of all Buddhas of past, present and future [Rinpoche 1999].

Green Tara or *Syama Tara* is the original and most popular form of Tara, and in the Tibetan language is referred to as *sGrolliang* [Shaw 2015]. The iconography of Green Tara is most often depicted as *Khadiravani Tara* or the "*Tara of the Acacia Forest"* [Shaw 2015]. She is recognised by her acolytes, *Asokakanta Marici* (golden) and *Ekajata* (dark blue), and because of the flowers depicted in her hair, like a floral crown [Shaw 2015].

There are other forms of Green Tara such as *Mahattari* Tara, *Varada* Tara, *Vasyadhikara* Tara, *Kapali* Tara and *Mahasri* Tara [Shaw 2015]. *Khadiravani* and *Vasyatara* are other forms of green Tara, who are the female counterparts (*shakti*) of *Amoghasiddhi* [Kumar and Sharama, 2018]. Exceptional forms of Green Taras include *Durgottarini* Tara, *Dhanada* Tara, *Janguli,* and sometimes *Parnasvari* [Kumara and Sharama, 2018].

White Tara

White Tara or *Sita* Tara is quite popular as well and is known as *Drolkar* in the Tibetan language [Shaw 2015]. [Fig 4] She is mostly known for her healing and life-extending powers and is thus associated with healing meditation. Healing meditation of White Tara can be performed for the benefit of others as well [Rinpoche 1999]. Often, in cases of serious health problems,

the person is advised to draw a painting of White Tara, following all ritual processes [Rinpoche 1999]. The painting should be made in a single day, on a full moon, when the moon is waxing, so that the painting can absorb the lunar energy [Shaw 2015]. Sita Tara is also often called Mrtyuvancana Tara [Kumara and Sharama, 2018].

Another form of White Tara is known as the "Wish Fulfilling Tara" or *Cintamanicakra* Tara, who through her protective wheels and circles, provides the meditator with peace, health, and life [Shaw 2015]. It is said that the meditator upon reaching the state of generation, can see the various coloured protective lights, that White Tara radiates, and each colour of light has a specific healing property. The white light removes illness, negative forces, and untimely deaths. The golden light extends life span and provides mental clarity and wisdom. The red hue of light blesses one with the power to conquer all three worlds. The light blue light grants destructive power and saves from demons, enemies, and misfortune. The green light confers magical powers, and the dark blue or purple light binds all these attainments [Shaw 2015].

Another emanation of White Tara includes *Syapna* Tara or Dream Tara, who presides over the dream state [Shaw 2015]. Out of her white emanations, *Astamahabhaya* Tara is the most popular. Other special White Taras include *Caturbhuja Sitatara, Sadbhuja Siatatara, Visvamata, Kurukulla* (two-armed), *Janguli* (white) [Kumara and Sharama, 2018].

Other Colours of Tara

Tara has various yellow emanations, such as *Rajasri* Tara, which has a more golden hue and holds a blue lotus [Shaw 2015]. There are also *Cintamani* Tara and *Vajra* Tara. The Golden *Prasanna* Tara is a wrathful manifestation of Tara, who is believed to be able to 'emancipate the universe' and banish ignorance [Shaw 2015]. *Janguli* has a yellow form as well [Kumara

and Sharama, 2018]. *Bhrkuti* is the yellow *shakti* form of *Amitabha. Prasanna* Tara is another exceptional form of yellow Tara.

In red, there is *Pithesvari,* who in Tibetan is known as *Drolma Marmo* [Rinpoche 1999]. According to the *Sadhanamala*, there is only one red emanation of Tara, which is her form as *Kurukulla. Kurukulla* is associated with *Amitabha* and red when she is depicted with four, six or eight arms [Kumara and Sharama, 2018].

Among her blue variations, *Ekajata* is the most popular. She is the *shakti* of Dhyani Buddha *Aksobhya.* Another form of blue Tara is *Mahacina* Tara, also related to *Aksobhya*, and is more popular within the Hindu Tantric pantheon [Kuamara and Sharama, 2018]. There is also a dark blue or black Tara, known as *Ekajata* or *Ugra* Tara, who is another wrathful manifestation of the goddess [Rinpoche 1999].

An interesting manifestation of Tara is known as the "Tara who is Peaceful by Day and Wrathful by Night," where she appears in her green form during the day and white form in the night [Shaw 2015].

Discussion

It has been established that there is a strong link between Thangkas and how in Thangkas, through colour symbolism, ideas, emotions, moods, and attributes are expressed and upheld. The various colourful manifestations of Tara as discussed have an association with the elements, moods, functions, and role of the deity. To understand the importance and use of colour symbolism in the Tara Thangkas, it is necessary to understand the stages of meditation as seen in Yoga Tantra and associated with Thangka. [Fig 4]

Fig 4: Green Tara as Protectress from the Eight Fears – Drowning, 19TH Century, Tibet,
Accession No. C2006.66.386, Rubin Museum

Painting's veneration. Tantra stresses the internal practice of yoga and invokes their true selves and reality, through the envisioning of the deity in them [Wein 2016]. Image visualisation is an integral part of the meditation process because the practitioner must envision themselves in the divine space,

as the divine deity and realise the attributes within themselves. A clear awareness of the deity and the divine reality on which the practitioner will focus is necessary. In realising and practising this, the meditator develops in themselves the attributes, such as wisdom, compassion, and so on. Thangkas of Goddess Tara is commonly used in performing the highest forms of internal yoga tantra [Wein 2016].

There are stages of generation and meditation found in the *Yoga Tantra* and the *Anuttarayoga Tantra*, as well as the Action and Performance Tantras [Wein 2016]. Action and Performance Tantra stresses on the internal practice of yoga and to invoke their true selves and reality, through the envisioning of the deity in them [Wein 2016]. The practitioner when viewing the central deity and the overall painting, they imagine themselves in the same space and environment depicted in the image, and this referred to as the beginning state of "generation stage" [Wein 2016]. The image visualisation is integral part of the meditation process because the practitioner must envision themselves in the divine space, as the divine deity and realise the attributes within themselves. A clear awareness of the deity and the divine reality on which the practitioner will focus on is necessary for the next state, which is known as "self-generation" [Wein 2016]. Self-generation of *mdag skyeds* in Tibetan, is when the meditator becomes one with the divine deity, who is enters the body of the practitioner through the crown of their head [Wein 2016]. Upon achieving the state of self-generation, the meditator comes to possess the same attributes possessed by the deity and use the powers of the deity. In realising and practising this, the meditator develops in themselves the attributes, such as wisdom, compassion, and so on [Wein 2016]. Thangkas of Goddess Tara are commonly used in performing the highest forms of internal yoga tantra [Wein 2016].

The visualised paintings of the Thangka are required for the untrained and unaware minds of the meditator, who is yet to enlarge their vision and concept of reality, but that is not just why the paintings are important. The precisely created paintings are representative of well-thought-out outlines and symbolic systems, which are built to trigger human psychology and thus bring out parallels to intellectual realities [Wein 2016]. The visual elements of a painting thus include details at a predictable level of understanding, with allusion to historical realities of the time they were created, of familiar objects and ideas, which aid the meditator in relating to the deity and makes it easier to envision themselves in the divine reality portrayed. The iconography of the deity and the colours aids in the inner contemplation of the meditator by including characteristics that are familiar and easier to replicate [Wein 2016]. The perfect and precise iconometry found in Thangka paintings is representative of the perfect and absolute qualities of the deities depicted which the meditators hoped to embody in themselves [Wein 2016]. Thus, in the case of Tara or Drolma, who is said to emerge from the void, is liberated from forms, and is a sentient being; the imagery and symbolism of a motherly figure, in various shades to correspond with her different moods, emotions, powers and associations, evokes an easier spiritual understanding and aids in the meditation process.

In the case of meditation on the images of Goddess Tara, interestingly, the meditator while visualising the Goddess, envisions the *panca-varna* or the five colours, with each of their sense organs, to undergo the process of purification and through self-generation attain their higher consciousness and awareness. The practitioner becoming one with the Goddess, visualises the colour white in his eyes, blue in his ears, green on the top of his head or crown area, yellow on his nose and red on his tongue, as he chants Tara's mantra "Om Tare Svaha" [Biswas 2005]. Tibetan tradition states, that the word "hum"

is envisioned blue in colour, but it radiates all five colours. And that the drop of the syllable 'ha' is red, and the vowel 'u' is green in colour [Biswas 2005].

This difference in the relation of the overarching connections and inter-links that exist in the practice needs to be understood through further studies. It has been mentioned before how the colours were associated with body portions and that they are not fixed, and interchangeable to reflect the purpose. Furthermore, Tara's role as the embodiment of even the speech if all Buddhas, and her being the Goddess of Perfected Wisdom, explains the colourisation of the hymns and syllables as well, during her meditation. The chanting of her mantra or hymn is an important part of the meditative practices associated with Tara.

In the Buddha family, the green colour of Tara is associated with the Action family of Jina Buddha Amoghasiddhi, who is also green, and attributed with enlightened wisdom and liberating powers [Rinpoche 1999]. However, as stated previously, according to her origin stories, Tara is associated with the Lotus family and with Amitabha and according to a few Avalokitesvara, whose associated colour is red [Shaw 2015]. But given the fact, that in the Buddhist pantheon, she is the all-encompassing one, including the five Buddha wisdoms and their respective families; Tara can emanate herself in all five colours (panca-varna) of white, yellow, blue, red and green, alongside possessing the associated powers and attributes as well [Shaw 2015].

An alternative explanation of Tara's green colour is that it expresses a more psychological and simpler association between a colour of divinity and the qualities it personifies [Shaw 2015]. Her green visual links her with nature and it is this connection with nature, that gets portrayed iconographically in her seated posture similar to that of a lotus plant, the symbolic lotus in her hand, her restorative and life-giving powers like that of the plant essence and her association with animals [Shaw 2015]. Often the aureole of Tara is also

depicted like a blossoming lotus, which aims to further evoke the sense of abundance and nature in the meditator.

Again, it has been seen, how the colours associated with ideas and symbols are not fixed, and that they are not to be understood with fixed meanings, but in the context and idea they are portraying – in the case of Tara, it is the mood or function she is playing, in response to the needs of the distressed.

Conclusion

In the case of Thangka paintings, and the visualisations depicted, it is believed that the earlier practitioners who succeeded and attained bodhicitta, created the visual imagery and passed it to those in the process and yet to attain bodhicitta, to aid them in the process [Wein 2016]. This is why Thangkas are referred to as 'written records' as they contain the knowledge and experiences of the ones who have encountered the deities and attained spirituality and realisation of the ultimate truth [Wein 2016]. The purpose of the thangkas is therefore to facilitate the meditators to realise their truths and realities and the world they live in [Tucci 1949].

On that account, it is essential to note that these visual representations of the deity, function to remove the dualistic thinking of simply equating symbols and colours with meaning. The utilisation of iconography to bring forth the teachings of Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy, and through it, a further transformative experience, the deity, and the painting need to be understood holistically and with all its elements. Paintings under Vajrayana Buddhism aim to widen the worldview and awareness of its viewers. This is done through the depiction of the unknown, and the unattained and by breaking pre-conceived and fixed notions regarding colours, symbols, and functions. Therefore, to understand and experience Thangka paintings,

focussing on a single element colour or symbol, or a singular deity, would be inaccurate. It is important to read all of them in their overall environment depicted and with each other. Thus, the artist, in this case, is not creating an image, but portraying a reality, a divine reality, yet to be realised and witnessed by others. In this regard, the colours used are likely to go beyond the intuitive understanding of concepts and symbols, to make the practitioner start afresh and understand the limitations of his awareness and knowledge. Goddess Tara in this regard, is, therefore, irreplaceable in advocating this barrier-breaking and non-dualistic way of thinking and worldview.

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