



## Newsletter Archives

### **Love and Passion in Tantric Buddhist Art**

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# Love and Passion in Tantric Buddhist Art

Article of the Month – July 2000



Notwithstanding the fact that the Buddha essence is non-polar, Buddhist iconographers use sexual polarity to symbolize the twin concepts of insight and compassion. All goddesses are symbols of insight and the gods represent compassion. The union of compassion and insight symbolizes the non-polarized state of bodhicitta, or the mind of enlightenment, which is represented visually by showing two deities engaged in sexual union. Tibetans characterize such images as yab-yum, which literally means father-mother; in Sanskrit the expression is yuganaddha (pair united). This sexual metaphor is also used to denote the highest stage of yoga in which there is no polarity, no discrimination, and the truth is indivisible as the vajra itself. It may be added parenthetically that while such images, whether statues or paintings, are today much sought after by collectors and boldly displayed in museums, in Tibet they were always meant to be seen only by the initiated. The rites associated with these images were also arcane and not for public consumption.

The word Tantra itself is derived from the verbal root tan, meaning to "weave". Many things are interwoven on the Tantric path, including the lives of men and women. The Buddha couples of Tantric iconography celebrate this deep harmony of the sexes. The purpose of this dynamic was the creation of partnerships devoted to the realization of the ultimate truth. For instance, the man cultivates pure vision by seeing the woman as a deity, her sexual organ as the throne of enlightenment, and her sexual fluid as divine nectar. Thus according to the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, sexual union also constitutes a fire sacrifice, as performed by the creator god Prajapati upon creating woman:

*Having created her, he worshipped her sexual organ;  
Therefore a woman's sexuality should be worshipped.  
He stretched forth from himself a stone for pressing nectar  
[i.e., causing a woman's sexual fluid to flow]  
And impregnated her with that.  
Her lap is the sacrificial altar;  
Her hair, the sacrificial grass;  
Her skin the soma press;  
The depths of her sexual organ, the fire in the middle*

*. . . . . Many mortals...go forth from this world...without merit,  
Namely, those who practice sexual union without knowing this.*

*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 6.4.1-4*

Often the mother is shown in a posture with both legs around the father's waist. In this remarkable and richly symbolic manifestation, both the male and the female are emanations of the Buddha. They appear simultaneously united and independent, like the complex relationship of sameness and difference between wisdom (female) and compassion (male) in the enlightened state. Ponderous, energetic forms confront the viewer in this stunning portrayal. Shamvara (supreme bliss) embraces the massive sky blue body of his consort Vajravahri, holding in his hands various implements symbolic of his triumph over ignorance and evil. She gazes rapturously and intently at her consort with her head thrown back, heightening their electrifying aura. Two of her arms tightly clutch Shamvara's neck. His first two arms embrace his consort, and holding a Vajra and a bell make the diamond HUM - sound gesture with the crossed wrists, behind her back. This gesture celebrates the inseparable union of method and wisdom.



The father-mother union image is not an example of erotic art, but is a manifestation of the Buddha's highest spiritual essence. More than metaphorical, to the devout Tibetan this image is concrete evidence of the existence of great spiritual attainment. The female (mother) represents transcendent wisdom: the direct awareness of reality as the Buddha experienced it and taught it. The male (father), represents compassion for all beings, which is the natural expression of such wisdom. Their union, although exquisitely blissful, is ultimately undertaken out of compassion for the world. This sacred communion of the male and female Buddha generates waves of bliss and harmony that turn the world into a Mandala (container of essence) and showers forth a rain of nectar that satisfies the spiritual hunger in the hearts of living beings everywhere. Modern depth psychology

has recognized such images to represent the deepest archetypes of the unconscious, integrating the powerful instinctual energies of life into a consciously sublimated and exalted state.

The texts often refer to the union of a lotus and vajra, or diamond scepter. Clearly, "lotus" and vajra are metaphors, not literal terms. One is not meant to bring together a flower and a scepter, but something denoted by these terms. Depending upon the level of interpretation, uniting the lotus and the vajra can mean uniting

wisdom and compassion, or bliss and emptiness, within the practitioner's psyche, or bringing together the female and male organs in physical union, or a number of other things that must be combined on the path to enlightenment.

*Along with Gopa, he experienced bliss.  
By uniting the diamond scepter and lotus,  
He attained the fruit of bliss.  
Buddhahood is obtained from bliss, and  
Apart from women there will not be bliss*

And at another place:

*The man [sees] the woman as a goddess  
The woman [sees] the man as a god.  
By joining the diamond scepter and lotus,  
They should make offerings to each other.  
There is no worship apart from this.*

... Candamaharosana-tantra

The forms expressing this union are based upon the germinal mantra 'Om mani padme Hum'. This mantra contains both mani, meaning jewel, synonym for vajra, the word which means diamond, thunderbolt and the male organ, and padme meaning 'in the lotus' (locative case of padma), a symbol for the female sexual organ, the outer opening of which resembles the petals of a lotus. This formal similarity, as well as the fact that the lotus is a Buddhist symbol of purity and enlightenment, makes this magnificent flower a natural symbol for feminine sexuality. The supportive texts envision a resplendent world of vivid color, choreographed movement, exquisite texture, and intimate gesture:



*Constantly take refuge at my feet, my dear...  
Be gracious, beloved, and  
Give me pleasure with your diamond scepter.  
Look at my three-petaled lotus,  
Its center adorned with a stamen.  
It is a Buddha paradise, adorned with a red  
Buddha,  
A cosmic mother who bestows  
Bliss and tranquility on the passionate.  
Abandon all conceptual thought and  
Unite with my reclining form;  
Place my feet upon your shoulders and look me up and down.  
Make the fully awakened scepter  
Enter the opening in the center of the lotus.  
Move a hundred, thousand, hundred thousand times  
In my three-petaled lotus Of swollen flesh.  
Placing one's scepter there, offer pleasure to her mind.*

*Wind, inner wind-my lotus is the unexcelled!  
Aroused by the tip of the diamond scepter,  
It is red like a bandhuka flower.*

*....Candamaharosana-tantra*

Another common Tantric metaphor for sexual union is the image of the "Churner and the Churned". Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), drawing on a range of Indian sources, explains that churning the female partner with the diamond scepter is the efficient cause of the nectar of Buddhahood, and argues that just as fire is kindled by rubbing two sticks together, bliss is generated by churning. The image of churning also refers to the Hindu myth wherein gods and demons churn the cosmic ocean of milk to extract its nectar. The goddess Sakti is produced from this process, and her sexual fluids become the immortality-bestowing nectar the gods are seeking. Thus, churning the yogic partner, which stimulates the flow of her nectar, mirrors the stirring of the cosmic ocean for its potent, liberating nectar. Churning also connotes the circulation of the yogic energy as it surges within the psychic channels and then rises in the central channel. Thus, the metaphor of churning, which appears to be a simple physical analogy, resonates richly with various nuances of Tantric union.

Tantric Buddhism is unique among Buddhist sub-traditions in its acceptance of the body and sense experience as sources of knowledge and power. Tantric Buddhists eulogized the body as an "abode of bliss" and boldly affirmed that desire, sexuality, and pleasure can be embraced on the path to enlightenment. In keeping with this life-affirming orientation, the movement upheld the possibility of liberating relationships between men and women and envisioned cooperative yogic methods that men and women can perform together in order to transform the ardor of their intimacy and passion into blissful, enlightened states of awareness. This mood of exuberant delight, graceful sensuousness, and reciprocity that often characterizes the sculpted and painted couples also suffuses the literary descriptions in the Tantric texts, which exult in an open and unshamed affirmation of sensuality in a religious context:

*Therefore, one who desires Buddhahood  
Should practice what is to be practiced.  
To renounce the sense objects  
Is to torture oneself by asceticism-don't do it!  
When you see form, look!  
Similarly, listen to sounds,  
Inhale scents,  
Taste delicious flavors,  
Feel textures.  
Use the objects of the five senses -  
You will quickly attain supreme Buddhahood.*

*... Candamaharosana-tantra*

Tantra asserts that, instead of suppressing, vision and ecstasy, they should be cultivated and used. Because sensation and emotion are the most powerful human motive forces, they should not be crushed out, but harnessed to the ultimate goal. Properly channeled they can provide an unparalleled source of energy, bringing benefits to society as well as continually increasing ecstasy for the individual. Tantra deals in love, and love needs objects. One cannot love nothing. Love means care; and care carried to the limit is perhaps the ultimate social virtue.

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(All quotations and translations are from the book "Passionate Enlightenment" by Miranda Shaw, which is a comprehensive and masterly analysis of the Tantric Buddhist tradition from a feminist perspective.)

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***This article by Nitin Goel.***

We hope you have enjoyed reading the article. Any comments you may have will be greatly appreciated. Please send your feedback to [feedback@exoticindia.com](mailto:feedback@exoticindia.com).

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