

YAB-YUM IMAGES: THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL FORM IN TIBETAN TANTRIC BUDDHISM AND ITS ART

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Abstract - Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is today considered as one of the most important and controversial forms of Asian culture. Compared to other schools of Buddhism, the traditional art of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism offers a rich and powerful range of magnificent, compelling, and somewhat controversial visual materials and meditative practices. To this end I am interested in this paper exploring the most mysterious nature of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art by grasping the religious value, historical context, and artistic quality of Yab-Yum images.

Keywords - Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, Sexual Images, Visualization, Meditative Practices, Representation, In-between State of Consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Among the most significant contributions that the Tibetans have made to their artistic tradition, sexual images, such as the Yab-Yum images, are often regarded as the most startling, radical and controversial form of Tibetan Buddhism today. These images represent the sexual union of the Buddha father and Buddha mother, which are created mainly as a means to support meditation and worship. In short, these images strive to express the in-between state of consciousness between man and woman and are created to help mankind achieve enlightenment with the wisdom of union and compassion as a guide in some Tantric meditative practices.

'Meditation', as Philip Rawson claimed in *The Art of Tantra* (1973), 'has the job of filling the abstraction with a valid content of reality'. Mental concepts that unify man and woman on the plane of ultimate reality are expressed in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art by drawing a large number of Yab-Yum images, and imagining sexual yoga by developing skills and in so doing a presence of mind to reach the state of in-between when practicing Tantric meditation. According to Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A. F. Thurman, the mother-Buddha symbolizes the abstract and quiescent concept of wisdom, which is necessary for any practitioner to be able to reach an awareness of a higher level of reality evident in the Buddha's experiences and thoughts, and the Father-Buddha represents compassion for all sentient beings. By embracing and uniting each other through their sexual organs, the Tibetan Buddhists believe that wisdom and compassion are combined into one; and when in this state of union the practitioners are able to reach the perfect state of mind to attain the ultimate enlightenment as emptiness. In the contemplation of icons such as Thangka, sculptures and the Mandala, the male deity, often seen standing or sitting in a lotus position, and his consort are seen like an impassioned couple looking adoringly at the face of their beloved embracing each other —the aim is a state of ecstasy in

balance with the peaceful consummation of physical union.

For instance, one of the common sexual images in Tibetan Buddhism is about Aksobhya, who is a central Buddha in one of the Five Wisdom Buddhas in his family, and his consort Lochanā, who plays a dominating role in the later developmental phase of Tantric Buddhism. The Sanskrit term 'Akshobhya', literally means 'Immovable One', is also translated to 'Āchūrúláí' (阿闍如来) in Chinese. According to the Scripture of the Buddha-land of Akshobhya (known as Ā chū fó GuóJīng 《阿闍佛國經》 in Chinese), a monk committed himself to practice the Dharma in the eastern world of delight with a vow of great compassion towards any beings in their quest to attain enlightenment. In fact he proved himself 'immovable' when confronting difficulties and in the end, he became the Buddha Akshobhya, who represents consciousness as a mere reflection of actual reality. The Buddha Akshobhya is located in the east of the Diamond Realm (known as JinGangJie 金剛界 in Chinese), a metaphysical space where Five Wisdom Buddhas inhabit, and also in the Eastern Pure Land and Abhirati (called as MiaoLeShiJie 妙樂世界 in Chinese), where various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas reside. In Tibetan Tantric paintings, he is often depicted as a blue body covered in three robes in semi-fierce forms, holding a bell along with a jewel, lotus, and sword (occasionally an elephant), and sitting in sexual union with his consort Lochanā, who is also shown in the same semi-wrathful mood. Although there are some sexual elements and rituals presented marginally in earlier Yoga tantras, the iconography of Buddha and his consorts in sexual union supports the Tantric practitioner in visualization, which has gained great prominence and popularity in Anuttarayoga or Mahayoga tantra. As Reginald Ray states,

In Mahāyoga, one visualizes oneself as the divinity with consort. "All manifestation, thoughts and appearances are considered to be the sacred aspects of

the divinities within relative truth," in the words of Tulku Thondup. By visualizing all phenomena as the deities of the mandala of buddhahood, in the development stage, all appearances are purified.

From my personal viewpoint, there are two outstanding features of sexual images in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art. The first is the use of the sexuality as a skillful means of attaining enlightenment as a metaphorical approach in the Tantric meditative practices; and the second is a Tantric initiation, which enables disciples to engage in rituals with sexual elements.

On the one hand, as I mentioned earlier, the Yab-Yum image is regarded as Tantric visual representations 'wisdom and compassion'. Firstly, it presents the sexual union of Buddha father and Buddha mother in iconographical or ritual contexts with great symbolic value, which is identified with cosmic energy as its emblem. Tantric Buddhism regards sexual intercourse as an important form of 'enjoyment' or 'pleasure', with the goal of reaching spiritual ends with divine ecstasy. When it links to Mandala, it can be seen as part of the process of purification in Tantric meditative practice in order to cleanse the inner energetic palate so that one can enter and be lifted into a higher state of mind in meditation practice. Also mental concepts that unify man and woman on the plane of ultimate reality are expressed visually in the Yab-Yum images. By means of drawing a large number of Yab-Yum images or visualizing these sexual images with complete concentration, it is also a process of imagining sexual yoga through the fully developed skills of maximizing the power of one's imagination and stabilizing one's subtle body of channels and wind-energies in Tantric meditation. Furthermore, Tantric followers believe that it is from one's apprehension of the essential emptiness of all that exists in beings and objects that one can experience the negation of all dualities and supreme bliss that arises from going beyond the concept of man and woman, self and other, good and evil, forbidden and allowed. This description of sexual images is meant to help both those who wish to make and use outward images, as well as those who need only to be reminded of the attributes of images, which they will inwardly realize in their own meditation. Here one can also see a distinction between Tantric Hinduism and Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Unlike Hinduism, which believes that in every image or reality there is 'something', Tibetan Tantric Buddhism asserts that where we think we are seeing something, in actuality and in truth we see 'nothing'. As Philip Rawson concludes in his book *The Art of Tantra*, the Yab-Yum image and practice aims to be in a state of mind devoid of any normal existential content what so ever. That is to say, a Tibetan Tantric image could be considered as a device for emptying the pre-given mind on its way to 'the void fullness of Nirvana', which is empty of any existential thought. Lastly, Tantric Buddhism teaches that a visual representation is a reflection of the true transcendent image whose sphere

of existence is the MIND-mind. 'What one worships', Philip Rawson says, 'that one becomes'. As Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche has taught, that one can find that all images are on a plane of emptiness, in which past, present, and future coexist and can be ordered in various ways. When confronting the Yab-Yum image, practitioners are 'surrounded by a mist of virtual sexual images, distributed themselves in mobile circuits' towards enlightenment. The belief here is that through the union of opposites in meditation wisdom and compassion might be attained. Meditative practices are thus an attempt to return to a state of union with all living beings that is thought to have co-existed together originally.

On the other hand, differing from the other schools of Buddhism, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism also expresses the physical body form in an innovative way by having the potential of becoming the 'enlightened body' in Tantric rituals with the aid of communication through exceedingly visual representations. For example, in the contemplation of icons about Vajradhara, the personification of Sakyamuni, and his consort Tilottama, Vajradhara is often depicted as two-armed sitting in a lotus position whilst embracing his consort with a peaceful consummation of physical union. For Tibetan practitioners, confronting these sacred sexual images, to meditate with a sexual consort in both mind and physical levels can be a swift method in the intermediate stage of Tantric practice to make the mind-body deeds magical. According to Robert A.F Thurman, who states:

Sexual union between coarse bodies is the only situation, other than death, in which all the neural wind-energies dissolve into the central channel. Thus the consort is essential to reach such depth in this life. Also Tantric followers believe that, during this Tantric ritual towards the image of Vajradhara and consort, they lay aside their rational knowledge and enter into a world where love can transform into sex and vice versa. Whereby sex can be sublimated into sacredness and in so doing the body becomes the shrine to this sacredness. In both their imagination and physical practices, as Buddha father, they gently hold our beloved in the most intimate embrace. The impassioned lover gazes upward in rapture, meeting their downward glance in such a peaceful consummation of physical union. They are fully absorbed with the beloved ones, who project the energy of transcendent wisdom, looking out of the past, the present, and the future and coexisting in the centre of the forehead that can see a deeper spiritual reality. They also should become Buddha mother, the beloved, feeling the ecstatic and unrestrained passion of love, in which pleasure is raised beyond pleasure and visualized as inseparable from emptiness. Here, Tantric Buddhism expresses the fluidity of bodies beyond biological sex through both the very common Tantric meditation practice of 'self-visualization' and its rituals engaged with one's physical body. Unlike many other spiritual traditions that reject the physical

body, Tantric Buddhism does not. Instead, Tantric followers use the physical body in such a way that it becomes the fundamental tool in the spiritual journey. There is a note that the employment of the physical body within the Tantric rituals of Tibetan Buddhism is fundamentally different from the ordinary experiences of having sexual intercourse in daily life. As Robert A.F Thurman continues to state:

For the process to work, both partners must be at the same stage, neither using the other as a mere instrument. Both must have the same visualization, the same understanding, the same motivation, and the same concentration.

Yet, the genuine performance at such a high level for the practitioner and his or her consort is probably very rare and the impure mind and motivation are very likely to lead to scandals about sex abuse in the physical performance within Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Subsequently, modern Tibetan Tantric practices put much more emphasis on visualization in its meditation, in which the practitioner doesn't need a real consort or even a coarse form of sexual images on a much more advanced level. It also requests that the Tantric practitioners are purely motivated, and have great understanding of the Sutra and Tantra Buddhist traditions, as well as the correct employment of stabilized wind-energies of the subtle body, and the powerful imagination, which would probably take decades of diligent meditative practices.

Nonetheless, from the western perspective, these images and Tantric practices may appear romantic and idealistic, with regards to gender relations and sexuality. However, from my own understanding, a beautiful and correctly conceived image of the Yab-Yum couple, such as Vajradhara and consort, is a magical visual pattern for meditation that can possibly awaken its inner image in the mind by fully concentrating on it and practicing the Tantric disciplines with great patience. As Serenity Young explains further: 'Through meditative skill the sensation of sexual pleasure is experienced as emptiness, the profound realization that all beings and all things are essentially empty, without individuality and non-enduring.' The cognitive notion of emptiness is known as 'unknowing mind', which is regarded as the leading role of 'correct mind' rather than the physical sensation of bodies themselves in the Tantric visualization. To some extent, the practice of Tantric meditation is about a state of mind or a state of consciousness with the fully acceptance of one's physical body as the natural and neutral path.

As discussed above, in contrast to Mahayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism proposes a more effective and visualised method within sexual images for its realization. Moreover, it also offers a profound, liberal and transformative potential in Buddhist values. In a very immediate and direct way, Tantric practices challenge practitioners to evoke the power of creative visualization in order to experience the empty nature of mind, and to seek a paradigm shift of

breaking down conventional and dualistic thought patterns. In Tantric literature, stories of Tantric adepts practising meditation in remote caves, desolate forests, and terrifying cremation grounds proliferate. Some abandoned their royal or aristocratic privilege. Some others pursue lowly forms of livelihood for Tantric practice to seek the freedom and enlightenment. For example, the 'fallen' monk Saraha, who broke his monastic vows and abandoned solitary wandering, found a young woman from the low arrow smith caste to be his spiritual companion, and adopted her trade and lifestyle as an arrow-maker himself. When he was denounced at the royal court, Saraha recited a series of spontaneous realization songs in his defense. One of his unconventional verses is like this: 'Perfect knowledge can only be attained, while one is enjoying the pleasure of the senses'.

...a great surge of joy and bliss will carry you soaring beyond all bodily sensation. The heat of an inner fire, like the fire that blazes on the southern edge of the universe, will rise through your body, burning away the thickets of mental obstructions (and) it will purify your body and transform it into the indestructible diamond body of bliss.

Whilst accepting that Buddha's have suppressed desires, emotions, and sensations of worldly life, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism nonetheless claims that an ascetic path is not necessary in order to attain Buddhahood. It requires a great deal of energy, diligent practice and determination to suppress desire over life-times, and by rejecting ordinary hopes, fears and desires that lead to the renunciators' lifestyle is very difficult for most Buddhists to achieve. Thus, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism recognises that desires, emotions and ecstasies are very powerful forces in human beings, and if their energy is re-directed to the spiritual path correctly by the aid of Tantric teachings, they can bring not only the freedom from sufferings, but an expanded capacity for creativity, purification, and also great bliss. Put another way, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism believes that all aspects of the psyche, including anger, fear, desire, joy, and ecstasy, should be embraced positively on the religious path to enlightenment. As John Powers states,

Tantra proposes to incorporate all actions, all thoughts, all emotions into the path. Nothing in itself is pure or impure, good or bad, mundane or transcendent; things only appear to us in these ways because of preconceived ideas. In the Vajrayana (Tantric) systems, any action—even walking, eating, defecating, or sleeping— can be an element of the spiritual path. Tantric practitioners seek to overcome the pervasive sense of ordinariness that colours our perceptions of daily life.

As sexual encounters provide excitement, pleasure and intimacy to ordinary people, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism considers the orgasmic state as the best occasion for medication. The reasons are explained well by the Indian mahasiddha Naropa in his *A Treatise on Empowerment in the Eleventh Century*,

...three qualities of consciousness that arise during orgasm (in the sexual encounter). The first of these is a sense of great pleasure or bliss. The second is an utter radiance or lucidity. Thirdly, an all-pervasive sense of non-duality or non-separateness arises. Tantric meditators utilize these three factors for their quick liberation and enlightenment.

Building upon early Indian Buddhism, the Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism in India, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism inherits, extends and develops many rituals and practices with various meditative techniques, known as 'skilful means' for the swift attainment of enlightenment. It offers a new way to transform their ordinary awareness in the midst of their daily experiences and to attain ecstatic inner freedom by visual meditation. In the process of developing meditations in any activities, including sex, Tantric followers are able to affirm that their emotions, desires, passions and all sense experiences are the fuel and energy for cultivating detachment and compassion and wisdom for meditation upon emptiness. The employment of sexual images as an art form in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism intends to transform the psyche and physical continuum of practitioners through extensive use of ritual, imagery, visualization, and meditation practice.

Here, I admit that the Tantric emphasis on sexuality and the other pleasures of the senses in Tibetan Buddhist art were not entirely new, and some texts seemed to condemn women while the iconography looks expressively to be exalting them. However, I argue that the form of these sexual images implies that a distinctive understanding of sexuality and the value of femaleness are presented both by Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its artistic tradition. To my knowledge, firstly, some texts in the Guhyasamāja Tantra and Hevajra Tantra, are the two most important scriptures of late Tantric Buddhism, that claim that, not only are the biological sexes unstable and emphatically illusionary, enabling women and men to change into each other, but also, women have the same or even greater potential to achieve enlightenment than men. According to Ajit Mookerjee, the spirit of a human being transcends all natural restrictions to attain eternal enlightenment for both man and woman in Tibetan Tantric art and practice. When one achieves enlightenment, the enlightened person is neither man nor woman, but transcends gender. Secondly, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism gives great significance to sex, and honour and shows respect towards women consorts, in theory. 'Tantric notion is the only spiritual path that says that sex is sacred and not a sin,' as Krsnananda Agamavagisa (the Sixteenth Century) comments, 'the pleasure derived from sexual union is of the nature of the Supreme Bliss'. The Tibetan Tantric Buddhist practitioner believes that in sexual union, women inherently possess wisdom or insights that procreate the energy for enlightenment, while men do not. For example, the Yab-Yum image in Tibetan Buddhist art is the visualisation of transforming and liberating

desire positively, as cosmic power provoked by the female deity. Therefore, 'women are embodiments of female deity' and men should respect and even worship women in Tibetan Tantric practice or meditation. This respect has been shown explicitly in some major Tantric scriptures in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism:

One must not denigrate women,
In whatever social class they are born,
For they are Lady Perfection of Wisdom,
Embodied in the phenomenal realm.

One who knows this yoga should always worship,
By the method of wisdom and skilful means,
Mother, sister, daughter, and niece,
He should always worship women
With his powerful sceptre of wisdom,
Even crippled women, artisans, and women of the lowest class.

Built upon the same fundamental Buddhist philosophy, there are somewhat contradictory views about the wide range of biographies, iconographies, and rituals related to the sexuality and women in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism over the centuries. In recent studies of gender and religion, some scholars, like Reginald Ray and Kalu Rinpoche, have paid serious academic attention on the sexuality of women in Indian and Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. For example, David Kinsley (1939-2000) points out in his paper Women's Studies and the History of Religion that women's studies of religion are greatly different from men's. Firstly, historians of religions found that there were quite distinct male and female subcultures within the larger patriarchal societies. Also, the religious experience for males and females in the same religious community can be evidently different. Thus, these scholars, such as Kinsley, address that the study of women's religion is still a new field full of challenges and difficulties. On a positive note, these scholars' endeavours have made some progress in exploring the positive aspects of women imagery and symbols in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. They point out the historical evidence that models of female divinity in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism have had a powerful influence on women's spiritual liberation; therefore, Tibetan women seem to have enjoyed more freedom and fulfilled more religious achievement than their counterparts in other Asian countries. From my own perspective, the re-analysis on sexual images engaged with figures of women and female deities in both the texts and visual presentations of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is worthy of further discussion at depth. However, the space here is limited for more detailed discussion in this paper.

CONCLUSION

As I explained in the beginning, among the most significant contributions that the Tibetans have made to their artistic tradition, sexual imagery represents

the sexual expectation or union of male and female deities, which are created mainly as supporting elements to the Tantric practices. In summary, I think that there are two outstanding features of sexual imagery—such as the images of the Yab-Yum couple—in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art. The first is the use of the sexuality as a skilful means of attaining enlightenment. That is, it serves as a metaphorical approach in the Tantric meditative practices. These sexual images strive to express the in-between state of consciousness between man and woman and are created to help mankind achieve enlightenment with the union of wisdom and compassion, as a guide in the advanced Tantric meditative practices. And the second is a Tantric initiation, which enables disciples to engage in rituals with sexual elements. Yet, genuine performance at such a high level for the practitioner and their consort is probably very rare, and the impure mind and motivation run the risk of sexual abuse. Subsequently, modern Tibetan Tantric practices put much more emphasis on visualisation in meditation, in which the practitioner does not need a real consort or even a coarse form of sexual images. It also insists that Tantric practitioners are purely motivated, and have great understanding of the Sutra and Tantra Buddhist traditions, as well as the correct employment of stabilised wind-energies of the subtle body, and the powerful imagination—something that takes decades of diligent meditative practice to cultivate.

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