

Deities in Tibetan Buddhism

by Bob Peck

A proper understanding of the role of deities is essential to understanding Tibetan Buddhism in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, Western students may have a difficult time defining to themselves who the deities are. Westerners sometimes avoid discussion of deities because it smacks of superstition and magic, or reinterpret the deities as merely symbols of psychological states. This devalues the richness of the teachings and damages the effectiveness of practice. If understood properly, there is no contradiction in accepting deities and maintaining a logical understanding of things, even for hard-headed Westerners.

There are six types of transmigrating beings that inhabit our realm of existence (Samsara). For convenience, we'll call this our world. Buddhism posits many inhabited worlds and many universes, but let's start at home. The six types of transmigrating beings are hell-beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demi-gods, and gods. These beings are on a scale of suffering to bliss and ignorance to understanding, but all of these beings are subject to rebirth in various forms determined by karma, not choice, and constantly move up and down the scale. We are familiar with humans and animals and can see many levels of development in the creatures and people we coexist with. Just in the last hundred years, science has shown the existence of many types of creatures that were unknown before. It is only logical that we should accept the idea of beings on a scale of development extending below and above us, whether we are aware of them or not. Logic dictates that they will be there in both directions. The "gods" of the mundane world enjoy beautiful surroundings and great bliss, but they are still deluded and attached, still not purified, so their blissful existence must end and they too are still bound by the cycle of suffering.

There are two types of transcendent beings: bodhisattvas and buddhas, those who have purified enough to break free of the karmic cycle. These are the deities of Buddhism as opposed to the mundane gods. These beings are no longer subject to karma and may take form by choice. Since they are free from attachment to form and understand completely the emptiness of form, they

may assume any form they choose. They may also have multiple forms at the same time.

The peaceful and wrathful forms of deities are like the front and back of the hand: 1. one exists because of the other

2. both are part of the same thing

3. both exist at the same time, but not in the same place since their existence is relational

A peaceful form denotes a wrathful form to be different from, but both are part of the same consciousness. Both may exist at the same time but not in the same place at the same time.

The process of attaining enlightenment is like alchemy, turning lead into gold. It's the lotus rising out of the mud. It is freedom from attachment to physical form, from ignorance, from all the other limitations we place on our potential that we don't realize because we think what we have is natural.

It seems magical, but magic is only that which we don't understand. My cat thinks I'm magical, and to her I am. She knows I can make heat and light, I can make food appear out of nowhere, and I can make pleasant sounds come through the air. Though she doesn't exactly treat me like a god, she knows I have some god-like abilities beyond her own that she would have to describe as magical. Turning on the lights, getting food out of the refrigerator, or turning on the stereo seem natural to me because I understand them at a different level. Since there are beings at levels of understanding below us, why wouldn't there be beings at levels of understanding above us who would seem magical due to our lack of understanding.

At some point in becoming familiar with the various buddhas and bodhisattvas of Tibetan Buddhism, you will encounter references to the Five Buddha Families. These are five buddhas that have associated characteristics and are viewed as reflexive appearances of certain qualities within us. We contain elements, seeds of the qualities of the Five Buddhas, so they are part of us and relate to different parts of ourselves. These elements are what will ripen into buddha-qualities in us.

Are they only abstract symbols of parts of our personalities? No. They are separate beings, but we can relate to them as developed examples of qualities in us. Because of the qualities we share at a

fundamental level, we are able to relate to them. Some of the characteristics of the Five Buddhas are:

buddha	element	color	delusion	mudra	family
Vairochana	water	white	anger	teaching	Vajra
Ratnasambhava	earth	yellow	pride, greed	giving	Ratna
Amithabha	fire	red	attachment	meditation	Padma
Amogasiddha	wind	green	jealousy	protection	Karma
Akshobya	space	blue	stupidity	earth-touching	Buddha

Notice that the colors of prayer flags correspond to the colors of the Five Buddhas. The attendant bohisattvas of the Five Buddhas are:

Vairochana - none

Ratnasambhava - Samantabadhra, Akashagarbha

Amithaba - Avolokiteshvara, Manjushri

Amogasiddha - Vajrapani, Sarvanivaranavishkhambin

Akshobya - Maitreya, Kshitigarbha

Of the Attendant Bodhisattvas, Vajrapani seems to be different. He always seems to appear in a wrathful, frightening form. Enlightenment brings together compassion, wisdom, and power (skillful means). Power is the ability to act in the most effective way based on compassion and wisdom. Vajrapani is surrounded by flames of wisdom and snakes of anger held in check by strong compassion. He is always standing, ready to act. He is energy personified.

Vajrapani has reason to appear frightening because he is a protector. He was a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha who used skillful means to protect the teachings and the Buddha, so Buddha entrusted him with protecting the powerful energy of tantra. He is sometimes referred to as "Lord of the Secret", and he is also still considered the protector of the Buddha. Vajrapani has a peaceful form, but it is seldom seen. He is very much a bodhisattva-warrior.

The Dalai Lama says that wrathful deities "do not stir from the Truth Body or from love". We have to remember that if we are

frightened or disturbed by wrathful deities, the fear and disturbance occurs in us. These beings appear to us the way they do because of our qualities.

Any practice involving a wrathful deity is a tantric practice and requires the permission and guidance of a teacher.



Vajrapani in peaceful and wrathful forms