

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Mandalas based on the Sarvadurgatiparshodhana Tantra***Museum # s: [95.007](#), [92.052](#), [92.063](#)By Kim Masteller and Chad Sawyer
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One day the Buddha was sitting amongst the assembly of thirty-three brahmanical gods when Indra came forward and asked "O Lord, seven days have passed since a god named Vimalamaniprabha died....where was he born?" To this the Buddha replied that Vimalamaniprabha had "fallen from here and was born in the great hell of Avici." At this, all the gods were filled with great distress, concerned that such a fate had come to one of their kind. Asking if there was a way to avoid such a fate, and more, to obtain enlightenment, they implored the Buddha for instruction. The Buddha responded by beginning the discourse known as the Sarvadurgatiparisodhana Tantra or "the practice concerned with the elimination of all evil destinies"(Skorupski, 1983, 4-5).

The Sarvadurgatiparshodhana Tantra belongs to the class of tantra known as Yogatantra, or Union tantra. Yogatantra has a greater emphasis on internal meditation, although it still employs some external ritual. In the practice of the Sarvadurgatiparisodhana Tantra itself, the person begins by reflecting on his or her own voidness. After this, they then cause to arise a series of mandalas including air, fire, great waters, and gold, finishing with Mount Meru and the palace at its summit which has four gates. This palace will serve as the structure of the mandala for the Sarvadurgatiparshodhana Tantra. In its center is envisioned the seat of the central deity with the "vowels and consonants" for wisdom and means melting into one another. At this point the practitioner "becomes fully perfected as the Shakya-Lion" and is in a state of concentration known as the "removal of all imperfections"(Skorupski, 27). He or she then recites the mantra for each deity which "comes forth as five rays [and] illuminates all the ten directions." These rays return to the practitioner's heart and mingle with the mantra to produce the "perfect bodily forms"(Skorupski, 28). Each deity is then brought forth, one by one, from his or her own heart to take their seats in the mandala. When the mandala with its inhabitants is complete, they recite hymns of praise to each deity and make offerings(Skorupski, 27,33). From this description one can see why the Sarvadurgatiparshodhana Tantra belongs to the Yogatantra class, for it employs both meditative (visualization) and ritualistic aspects. This tantra may also be employed to aid those who have died. To do this, the previous rite is carried out, along with additional acts aimed at helping the deceased. These include purifying their bones by striking them with white mustard seeds and washing away the impurities of the three states of existence (past, present, and future) with water. As part of these actions, the recited mantras include spells attributed to Amitabha and Ratnasambhava for the pacification of the sorrows of all living beings and the destruction of all the dwellings of Mara (death) respectively(Skorupski, 44-5). A series of burnt offerings are then made. This description of this rite closes with:

"This being completed for those living beings, they are freed from the misery of hell and act for the benefit of living beings in joyful realms. They are born like Buddhas" (Skorupski, 34).

In the creation of a painting of the mandala for the Sarvadurgatiparshodhana Tantra, the text itself gives very specific instructions concerning the placement of images, and the order in which to paint them. When this is done, a rite of 'opening the eyes' of the deities is then performed. It is this act which makes the painting 'real' or potent and a useful aid in the 'elimination of all evil destinies' (Skorupski, 80).

The iconography of the three Sarvadurgati mandalas in the collection of the Southern Allegories Museum of Art agree with that of the 37 principle deity mandala of Sarvavid Vairocana as recorded in the Ngor monastic tradition (Bsod-nams-rgya-mtsho, Ngor Thar-Tshe Mkhon-po, number 27). At the center of the mandala is Sarvavid, all or universal- knowledge, Vairocana. Vairocana is a jina, or victor Buddha. He is the universal principle from which the Buddhist universe depicted in these mandalas emanate. Vairocana is usually white in color and has four faces. The figures circling Vairocana alternate with male Buddhas at the four cardinal directions and female Prajnas, or consorts, at the corner directions. Below Vairocana, at the bottom (east) of the center and moving clockwise are the figures: Vishodhanaraja and his consort Buddhilocana, Jinavararatna and his consort Mamaki, Shakyakulendra and his consort Pandara, and Kamalakumita and his consort Tara. The four surrounding Buddhas are forms of the jinas, which is evident in that they share the same female Prajnas and the jina Buddhas.

The next or inner circle of the mandala contains sixteen vajra or adamantine beings. Starting in the bottom right corner, the northeast, and moving clockwise, the figures are: Vajrasattva, Vajraraja, Vajraraga, Vajrasadhu, Vajraratna, Vajratejas, Vajraketu, Vajrahasha, Vajrabhasa, Vajrakarman, Vajraraksha, Vajrayaksha, and Vajrasamdhu. These may be sixteen forms of the guru Vajrasattva. (Sarvadurgatiparshodhana-tantra, 41) The meditator becomes Vajrasattva during meditation. As Vajrasattva, the meditator purifies his or her body and realizes himself as Vairocana. These may also be identified as sixteen Vajrabodhisattvas who often reside in the houses of the jina Buddhas.

The next layer out from the center is a square field called the inner house. Residing in the four corners of the inner house are the eight offering goddesses of Buddhism. The offering goddesses bear gifts of flowers, incense, music, and dance, all of the offerings which should be presented before a Buddha. During meditation, the devotee becomes identified with the offering goddesses and makes offerings to the Buddhas of the ten directions, in reality, to all Buddhas of all times. It is through these offerings that a proper and purified environment for Buddhist enlightenment is created.

Four Vajra-beings reside at the four gateways guarding the cardinal directions of the inner house. To the east (bottom), is Vajrakusu, to the south is Vajrapasha, to the west is Vajrasphota, and to the north is Vajraghanta. These gate figures serve to protect the sacred space in the center of the mandala.

The next layer from the center is the outer house, which contains two rows of figures. These can be distinguished as the inner layer and outer layer of the outer house. The inner layer contains a group of sixteen Bodhisattvas. These sixteen Bodhisattvas are: Maitreya, Amoghadarshin, Apagajaha and Sarashokatamonirghatatanamati in the east, Ghandhahastin, Suramgama, Guganaganja and Jnaketu in the south, Amrtaprabha, Candraprabha, Bhadrabala and Jaliniprabha in the west, and Akshayamati, Vajragarbha, Pratibhanakuta, and Samatabhadra in the north.

The outer layer of the outer house consists of sixteen Sravakas or Arhats. Arhats are monastic saints,

most of whom who were advanced monks at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. Arhats are the most advanced level of human attainment available to practitioners of the Theravada tradition. Arhats appear in Mahayana and Tantric traditions, as evident from this painting, however their position in the Buddhist hierarchy of beings is lower than that of Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, and many of the goddesses and guardians of the Buddhist pantheon. In Tibet, a standard set of sixteen Arhats is usually depicted, and there are indeed, sixteen in each of the three mandalas in this show.

At the gates of the outer house are sets of fierce guardians. These guardians may be depicted in angry or monstrous forms, but that is only to reveal the strength and energy with which they defend Buddhism and Buddhist sacred space.

Each of the four corners of the Outer house contain a Pratyaeaka Buddha seated in meditation. Pratyaeaka Buddhas are enlightened beings who have reached a state of Buddhahood, but do not teach.

Circling the mandala system of each of these three mandalas are a series of deities called lokadevatas. These are deities of location, who reside in and protect the cardinal and corner directions. Included in these examples are the Guardian Kings of the four directions, which are located at the cardinal points in this ring of figures. Many of these locative deities, such as the serpent deities, or nagas, are common to both Buddhist and Hindu traditions.

Outside of the ring of lokadevatas may be found different images which reflect deities, lineages, and/or themes associated with the tantra. Especially reinforcing to its general theme of salvation is the depicting of the Six Realms of Existence (T. rigs drug gi skye gnas) found in painting [#95.007](#). The six dissonant emotions of desire, anger, pride, doubt, false views, and ignorance give rise to the nature of these realms and to samsaric existence itself. Because all six dissornate emotions may be experienced by humans, these realms may also be thought of as representations of psychological states.

The three lower realms are those of the animals, hell-beings, and hungry ghosts. The animal realm, depicted in the bottom right, is characterized by overpowering dullness and ignorance where beings are dominated by the needs to reproduce and eat. Their lives are often short and end violently. The realm of hell-beings, bottom left, is divided into eight hot hells and eight cold ones. The predominant emotions of beings residing here are hatred, aversion, and aggression. Hungry ghosts, shown to the above left of the hell-beings, are beings with enormous bellies and either pinpoint mouths and/or necks. Hence, because they are unable to get enough food or drink, their existence is ruled by craving, greed, and yearning. The beings in all three of these realms are often too immersed in their pain to reflect on the Dharma, thus they tend to live in these realms for many lifetimes (Ways of Enlightenment, 1993, 211-12). The three higher realms consist of the titans or anti-gods, gods, and humans. The titans, in the upper right corner, are incredibly strong beings with vast wealth. But they are also filled with jealousy and suspicion, and so are at constant war with one another as shown. Of the six realms, the one of the gods, depicted in the upper left corner as three beings seated on an elephant, seems the most desirable. The predominant emotion here is extreme pride. Living in perfect health, they need but desire an item and it will appear, thus, there is very little or no suffering. But because their existence is so nice, they have little reason to reflect on or practice the Buddhist teachings. By the time death approaches it is too late to change one's destiny, and the gods often react with shock and dismay as in the story concerned with these mandalas.

The final realm is that of human beings, shown in the bottom right corner above the animals as people working and possibly worshipping and meditating. It is a realm primarily characterized by passion and desire. The intellect is the most active in this realm, but is often used in the service of striving and judging. Because the amount of suffering varies the most in this realm, being neither excessive nor absent, beings here have a greater ability to reflect on the nature of *samsara* than in any of the other realms. And it is because of this that enlightenment is only possible from the human realm (Ways of Enlightenment, 212-13).

With the goal of the alleviation and eradication of suffering, the Sarvadurgatiparisodhana Tantra was composed to aid beings in attaining a favorable rebirth in which they might heed and practice the Dharma. These mandalas serve as visual representations of the powers, inherent in one's enlightened nature or 'heart-mind', to bring about such a result.

References:

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