

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Ushnishavijaya in the Womb of the Chaitya*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder

21.75 x 26.75 inches

Eastern Tibet Ca. 19th century

Folk tradition

Museum #: 97.079

Ushnishavijaya and Surrounding Buddhas (Image below)

Thangka Painting

Cotton support with mineral pigment in animal collagen binder

Tibet

Gelugpa Folk Tradition

Museum #: 96.017

By Natalie R. Marsh

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Ushnishavijaya, the "Victorious Crown Protrusion," is depicted as the primary deity in two examples in the SAMA collection (cat. #'s 97.079 and 96.017) Virtually all Buddhist goddesses are essentially emanations of the archetypical goddess, Prajnaparamita, thus, Ushnishavijaya is understood to also be a Buddha Matri, or "Mother of the Buddhas." In addition, she further serves as the Prajna, or the female aspect of enlightenment and representative of *shunyata*, or the void. As a fully enlightened being she is herself a Buddha. The goddess's iconography varies slightly in the two folk tradition pieces shown.

Frequently, the goddess is portrayed in her textually based iconographic form as described in the Sadhanamala. She should be envisioned as white in complexion with three faces each possessing three eyes. She is youthful and bedecked in many ornaments. Her right and left faces are yellow and blue respectively. In her right hands, from top to bottom, she carries the Buddha on a lotus; the arrow; and *varada mudra*, or the boon-granting gesture. In her left hands, in the same order, she carries the noose with *tarjani mudra*, the threatening gesture; the bow; and the vase of life. In her two primary hands, left and right respectively, she holds her hand in *abhaya mudra*, the gesture of fearlessness, and carries the *vishvavajra*. She resides in the womb of the *chaitya* and should bear the image of Vairochana in her crown.¹

These attributes possess specific symbolisms beginning with the *vishvavajra*, which represents the adamantine clarity of the essence of existence, the bow and arrow together symbolize the "twin-unity of contrasts," and the noose is here understood to be a weapon guarding healthy life, rather than as a weapon unleashed on the enemies of the Dharma. The vessel of life holds the water used for cleansing one of disease, providing a healthy physical body necessary for doing good deeds in order to secure a

better life in the future. The Buddha on a lotus held in the goddess' upper secondary right hand is specific to Ushnishavijaya and is likely an indicator of her role as the creator of Buddhas.²

The SAMA collection painting of Ushnishavijaya, # 96.017 , depicts the large centralized goddess in a manner following the Sadhana quoted above. Her iconography is inconsistent only in her depiction as a goddess seated on a lotus rising from a great lake, rather than seated within a large stupa, or chaitya. However, her presence in the chaitya is understood and identifies her as the embodiment of the enlightenment mind of all Buddhas. Above Ushnishavijaya is a lineage of Tsong Khapa, who may himself be represented as the largest centralized figure amid the smaller teachers, and who by his presence indicates that this painting is from a Gelugpa tradition. The identification of the lineage of Tsong Khapa is based on the attributes of each figure, all of whom hold their hands in dharmachakra mudra, the teaching gesture, and are flanked by delicate lotuses in the centers of which rest, from left to right respectively, a sword and a book. To the immediate left and right of this lineage field, and interspersed evenly across the rest of the painting's composition, are small generalized representations of 100 Buddhas. Undoubtedly, these are to be considered the offspring of Ushnishavijaya, in her role as a Mother of the Buddhas. Also represented in the top center of the composition are two damaged and, thus, unidentifiable Buddha figures. To the proper right of the teaching lineage, and above Ushnishavijaya, is a single small representation of the protective krodha form of Vajrapani.

The Stupa of Ushnishavijaya, cat. # 97.079, depicts the deity in her understood setting within the womb of the chaitya, surrounded by 109 additional smaller chaityas. This identifies her as the personification of the enlightened mind of all Buddhas, and by extension all enlightened beings. This ca. 19th century example is clearly painted in a folk tradition style, possibly from Eastern Tibet. The goddess' attributes are slightly different than those presented in the Sadhanamala. Her primary hands are held in dharmachakra mudra, the teaching gesture frequently held by Vairocana, of whom she is an emanation. In her secondary right hands, from top to bottom, she holds the Buddha on a lotus, the arrow and varada mudra with a lotus. In her secondary left hands, again from top to bottom, she carries the noose, the bow, and the jar of life. According to the Sadhanamala, her primary left hand should be in abhaya mudra, the fearlessness gesture. In addition, her left and right faces are blue and red respectively, rather than blue and yellow, indicating a possible local variation.

Interesting to note in this example however are the presence of two bodhisattvas flanking the central deity. This likely follows a specific meditation on the deity, a portion of which is as follows:

"I am clothed with upper and lower garments made of silk and decorated with various jewels. I am surrounded by a garland of white light. On my right side, on a moon disc, is white Avalokiteshvara, holding a yak-tail fan in his right hand and a lotus in his left. At my left side, on a sun disc, is blue Vajrapani, holding a yak-tail fan in his right hand and, in his left hand, an utpala flower with a vajra on top of it. Both have peaceful expressions. Both are decorated with jeweled ornaments and are dressed in silken garments. They are both standing in the same posture."³

Clearly, the two bodhisattvas in this example vary slightly from the identification provided. The bodhisattva Vajrapani does not seem to have a vajra painted on either of his flanking lotuses, and both figures do not carry yak-tail fans, or chauris. However, because of the variances in the iconography of the primary deity, already discussed above, and because this painting is done in a folk style, these

absences are minor. As this same meditation proceeds, four protective deities and two offering deities are visualized.⁴ These may be represented as the four semi-circular arranged dark-blue identical Vajrapani figures painted below Ushnishavijaya. The two offering deities may be represented by the apsaras above the large central chaitya in which Ushnishavijaya is seated. Such iconography indicates the direct representation of Ushnishavijaya as Vairochana, of whom she is an emanation.

Ushnishavijaya is further recognized as one of the three long-life deities, a group which also includes Amitayus Buddha, a special form of Amitabha Buddha, and Sita, or White, Tara. This group is sometimes depicted together, as can be seen in SAMA collection painting cat. # Her worship leads to the purification of the *klesha*, which arise from the negative actions of the body, speech and mind and for the general elimination of barriers to longevity.⁵

There are three specific roles, or forms, of Ushnishavijaya, including that provided in the Sadhanamala. As a personification of a *dharani*, or invocation, she is included as a member of ten to twelve deities. In this role she is white with one face and ten arms. In her primary right hand she holds the *vishvavajra*, *kula* symbol of the Jina Buddha Amoghasiddhi. Ushnishavijaya is also understood as the Guardian of the Zenith in the Mandala of yellow Vajratara. In this capacity she is also known by the names Ushnishavijayatara, or simply Ushnisha, and is the counterpart of the male aspect, Ushnishacakravartin. She is depicted as white or yellow and carries the *chakra* in her primary right hand and holds her primary left hand in *tarjani mudra*, the gesture of menace.⁶ Ushnishavijaya is said to have been a special deity to Vasubhandu, the half-brother of Asanga. Because Vasubhandu had not always been faithful in his belief of the Mahayana teachings, he was not able to take meditative vision on the Bodhisattva Maitreya, Buddha of the Future, as he wished. Instead, as his brother Asanga had been instructed by Maitreya, he was to meditate on Ushnishavijaya since she was already a close personal deity of Vasubhandu. In his next lifetime Vasubhandu would be allowed to meditate on and see Maitreya.⁷

1 Bhattacharya, B, The Indian Buddhist Iconography, 101; and Mallman, Marie Therese de, Introduction A L'Iconographie de Tantrisme Bouddhique, 389-390

2 Olschak, Blanche C., The Mystical Arts of Ancient Tibet, 40.

3 Images of Enlightenment, 94

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*, 92.

6 de Mallman, Marie Therese, Introduction A L'Iconographie de Tantrisme Bouddhique, 389-390.

7 Weber, and ,Images of Enlightenment, 92.

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