

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)**Taras:*****Sita, or White Tara*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

23.75 x 34.75 inches

Central Tibet

Ca. 19th century

Mixture of Menri Serma and Karma Gadri styles of the Kadampa tradition

Museum #: 97.070

Shyama, or "Dark (green)" Tara from a set of the Astamahabhaya, or "8-Great Salvations" ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

Central Tibet

Ca. 18th or 19th century

Menri Serma "New School of Men style"

Museum #: 97.266

Shyama, or "Dark (green)" Tara ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

exterior 21.0 x 31.5 inches

interior 14.75 x 21.5 inches

Central Tibet

Ca. 19th century

Menri Serma "New School of Men style" (folk interpretation) of the Shakyapa tradition

Museum #: 92.058

Shyama, or "Dark (green)" Tara ([Image](#))

astadhatu, or "eight-elements," sculpture

Metal, sculpture Brass and "cold gold" paint

13.0 inches high without base

Tsang District

Ca. 12th century

Derived from the Indian, Pala school

Museum #: 94.009

By Natalie R. Marsh

23 June, 1998

The goddess Tara is an intriguing and multifaceted deity within Tibetan Buddhism. She is manifest in

numerous forms as befit her multiple roles, for which she is worshipped accordingly. Her name may be translated and interpreted in several ways. The term, "Tara," means "star," and is most closely associated with the polar stars, the primary tool used by mariners and travelers in following a correct path during journeys. This meaning is clearly related to Tara's role as one who guides and saves individuals from the perils of travel, whether physical or spiritual. The Sanskrit verbal root "tri," another possible linguistic link meaning "to carry across, assist in difficulty, to rescue or save," is also associated with Tara's name, and subsequent role as a saviouress.¹

The Sita Tara from the SAMA collection ([# 97.070](#)) is an excellent combined menri serma and karma-gabris style example of the goddess in her saptalochana, or seven-eyed form. She possesses eyes on the palms of her hands, the soles of her feet and a third eye, added to the expected two, on her face. Sita Tara is seated on a lotus, indicating her enlightened state, with the two eyes on her feet symbolizing her ever-vigilant recognition of sentient beings' plight. Her crossed legs symbolize her undying dedication to meditation on the state of Nirvana. Her right hand is gracefully lowered in varada mudra, the boon-granting gesture. The eye positioned on this hand symbolizes her ability to provide generosity coupled with perfect wisdom. Her left hand holds the stem of a three-blossomed lotus, each in different states of bloom. The closed, sometimes drooping blossom represents the Buddhas of the past; the open blossom, those of the present; and the bud, those Buddhas yet to be born. In the center of the open lotus blossom is a bija, or Sanskrit syllable, "ta," painted in fine gold pigment and referring to Tara's name. The third eye on Sita Tara's face is used to recognize the ultimate sameness, or unity, of all things, while the other two see the ultimate differentiation of all existence. Her white color refers to the whiteness of the autumn moon.²

Sita Tara's connection with the moon is not without great symbolic purpose. The affiliation of the moon with the monthly cycle of the female relates to the goddess' role as a Mother Goddess, or, as another epithet describes, a Buddha Matri, or "Mother of Buddhas." In turn, in Tantric Buddhist practice the moon symbolizes the wisdom aspect, which, when coupled with compassion, lead to enlightenment. Sita Tara, as connected with the moon, is sometimes shown seated upon a moon disk. This may be the case in the SAMA collection painting shown in which the goddess sits atop an unpainted disk³.

This example of Sita Tara is found in two specific verses in the Tara Tantra. In the first verse she is one of the two Taras, one white and one green, born of the tears of compassion of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, resulting from the extreme state of sadness he experienced when observing the strife of the sentient beings for whom he labored. Various sources document the two Taras differently. In one version, Sita Tara is the white goddess, and the green goddess may be Shyama Tara, described below.⁴ A second version, the most common, describes the two as Sita Tara and Bhrikuti, as a form of Shyama Tara.⁵ In Tibet, the two wives of the 7th century king, Songtsen Gambo, are considered the emanations of the two Taras, Tara and Bhrikuti. The Chinese Tang dynasty princess Wen Cheng, one of the two brides, was believed to be Sita Tara, and the Nepali princess was considered to be Bhrikuti. Sita Tara is also present in the 21-Verses in Praise of Tara, from the 35th chapter of the Tara Tantra. She is specifically located in the fifteenth verse in which she is described as the "Truth Body Tara."⁶

Sita Tara is widely venerated through pujas and meditation rituals for the benefit of a sick individual's recovery from illness. In this capacity she is understood to be one of the three longevity deities, joined with Amitayus Buddha, a special form of Amitabha Buddha, and Ushnishavijaya, discussed in a

separate essay on this site and represented in two SAMA paintings. (#'s [97.079](#) and [96.017](#)) Her role as a longevity deity relates to the salvation aspect of her persona and the additional activities in which this goddess, though in other forms, involves herself, namely, the astamahabhaya, or "8-Great Salvations," discussed below. Because of these powers, practitioners often commission and present their lamas and gurus with paintings and images of Sita Tara on a yearly basis. This is done to encourage the longevity of a teacher in his efforts to teach the Dharma, thus aiding in the guidance of students' process towards enlightenment.⁷

Tara also played an important role in the propagation and growth of Buddhism in Tibet. When consulted by Atisha, the great 11th century teacher from India, Tara recommended he travel to Tibet to teach the Dharma even though doing so would shorten his life by twenty years. He followed her advice and benefited many through his teachings which are known in the Kadampa, Sermapa, Kagyupa and Shakyapa traditions.⁸ During the 15th century this tradition, under the leadership of Tsong Khapa, became known as the Gelugpa. Note the unidentifiable red-capped figure in the upper right, above the central goddess, whose presence establishes this painting as a Kadampa tradition work. The Buddha to the upper left, above Sita Tara, is a representation of the Buddha Amitayus, another long-life deity.

Shyama, or "Dark," Tara is generally visualized and painted green. She is represented in three examples in the SAMA collection; two paintings and a single sculpture. As an action-oriented form of the goddess, Shyama Tara is associated with the green Amoghasiddhi, the Jina Buddha of the North and leader of the action kula, or family. In [# 92.058](#), painted in a 19th century village version of the menri serma style, Shyama Tara is represented in her usual royal ease posture, or lalitasana, with her left leg bent in the lotus position and her right leg in front of her body, slightly bent with foot resting on a lotus blossom. This indicates her simultaneous preparedness to rise and come to the aid of a practitioner in need and her insightful wisdom necessary for discerning when such action would be appropriate.⁹ Shyama Tara, like her other manifestations, is represented as a young and beautiful woman with great energy to do good for her followers. She is depicted with lovely robes, headdress, and jewelry appropriate to her royal stature.

Shyama Tara, as depicted here, may also be referred to as Khadiravani Tara. Khadiravani, the paradise in which Tara is said to dwell, is a great mountain kingdom with many types of trees, an abundance of animals, and flowers. In this form Tara usually holds a blue lotus, or utpala, in her left hand, and occasionally in both hands, as is clearly depicted in this painting. In this form, Tara's role as saviouress, aiding travelers through dangerous natural environments, may be conceptually amplified.

Depicted below Shyama Tara are two protective deities; Palden Lhamo to the left and Garba Nagpo, the blacksmith, to the right. Both of which are described in essays corresponding to images numbered, [#91.001.018](#) (Palden Lhamo) and [#97.279](#) (Garba Nagpo). It is likely that these were ishtadevatas, or "chosen deities," with personal significance to the commissioner of the work.

Above Shyama Tara, in the upper left corner of the composition, is a depiction of an unknown Gelugpa teacher with left hand holding a book in his lap and right hand raised in vitarka mudra, the gesture of debate, and holding a lotus. In the upper right corner of the painting is a representation of another Gelugpa teacher, possibly Palden Yeshe, the 3rd Panchen Lama (1737-1780). His left hand holds a begging bowl on his lap and his right hand is raised in vitarka mudra.¹⁰

An additional role of Shyama Tara is presented in the menri serma style painting, [#97.266](#), in which the goddess is in the act of saving a practitioner from stampeding elephants located in the lower left portion of the composition. Out of her hand a golden ray of light, painted as a thread of gold paint, flows down towards the heads of the angry elephants. The thread of light is tipped with a golden star, perhaps referring to the goddess' name, which represents her power to console and calm the dangerous animals. This is one of the "8-Great Salvations," or the astamahabhaya, for which the goddess is well-known. Originally these eight acts of salvation were identified in association with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, though at an early period this association was transferred to Tara, the bodhisattva's own emanation and female personification of compassion. To be read on two levels, the literal as well as the metaphoric, the eight great salvations include the following: fear of lions, or pride; fear of elephants, or ignorance; fear of fire, representing anger; fear of snakes, envy; fear of robbers, or wrong views; the fear of imprisonment, representing avarice; the fear of floods, or attachment; and the fear of demons, or doubt. In the SAMA painting the elephants may communicate an oncoming physical threat to a practitioner, but also, the threat of continued delusion from which Tara provides protection. Tara's ability to oversee a practitioner's journey over land and sea is amplified in these very mundane concerns within the Tibetans' nomadic and merchant lifestyles.

The sculptural example of Shyama Tara is an interesting example of Tibetan craftsmanship. The color and quality of the metal would indicate the possibility that this is an astadhatu, or "8-elements" alloy. The eight elements, including gold, silver, iron, copper, lead, zinc, tin and antimony, are combined to vivify the object, thus increasing its resonance and appropriateness for the goddess' invocation. The scraped surface of the face of the sculpture, and remnants of polychrome, suggest that the face of this piece was formerly cold gilt and painted. In addition, the unpainted lotus discourages the assigning of identification of the sculpture as Khadiravani Tara, whose iconography is dependent on the presence of at least one blue lotus, or utpala. This example does not communicate a specific practice associated with the goddess because of its decontextualized status, combined with a lack of specific iconography.

Initial appearances indicate a dating of the 8th to 9th century in an early Pala style from Central India, as evidenced by the pointed halo and lengthened shape of the body. However, the type of feathery lotus held in the goddess' left hand, and the unfinished nature of the back of the sculpture, indicate a later date and Tibetan origin. Tibetan sculptures are frequently left unfinished on the back, unlike Indic versions. The sloppiness of the spew, an element which does not necessarily assist in dating the piece, indicates a general disregard for the craftsmanship so prevalent in most Pala period sculptures.¹¹

Interesting to note is Tara's insistence to remain in a female body while functioning as a bodhisattva, assisting all beings, regardless of sex, in their attainment of enlightenment. When taking the bodhisattva vow, it is said that she refused to pray for rebirth as a male, the preferred form of rebirth for Buddhist practice. Instead she vowed to always take female births. Regardless of the balance of male and female aspects within the philosophical understanding and pursuit of enlightenment, the actual religion was, at the time, predominantly male in its membership, leadership, and outward practice. Women were allowed to become nuns only after significant consideration by the Buddha. And, once organized, they were ultimately subordinate to the order of monks. However, it is thought that this policy may have simply been the influence of the social structure of India and other Asian cultures. ¹²

Though little has been said of Tara's role as a Tantric deity, her place within this practice is a significant one. As an enlightened being herself, Tara is that perfection of compassion and wisdom which is ever present within every sentient being's heart-mind. As a bodhisattva, in addition to her identity as a Buddha, Tara serves as the female partner to Amoghasiddhi, a Jina Buddha who is one of the primary components within most Tantric practice. As his partner, Tara is the prajna, or personification of the wisdom component requisite for the development of the enlightened state. Her form also changes, like most Tantric deities, ranging from a fierce red multi-armed emanation named Kurukulla, who represents the capacity of subjugation; to the golden, multi-armed, four-faced manifestation named Vajra Tara, also capable of aiding in subjugation; to the Sita Tara form already described above.¹³

The Taras, as can be seen from only four examples described above, may have many roles and iconographic representations. Since she may be understood to function on three levels; as a bodhisattva, working to advance the enlightenment state to all sentient beings; as a Buddha, a fully enlightened being herself; and as a great mother of Buddhas, or Buddha Matri, her multifaceted nature is divided into an equal number of manifestations.

1 Ghosh, Mallar, Development of Buddhist Iconography in Eastern India: A Study of Tara, Prajnas of Five Tathagatas and Bhrikuti, 7-8.

2 Rhie, Marylin and Robert Thurman, Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet,

3 Willson, Martin, In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress, 19.

4 Rhie, Marylin and Robert Thurman, Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet, 124-125.

5 Rhie, Marylin and Robert Thurman, Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet, 129.

6 Rhie, Marylin and Robert Thurman, Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet, 125.

7 Images of Enlightenment, 90

8 Images of Enlightenment, 91

9 Images of Enlightenment, 83 and Wisdom and Compassion, 129.

10 Olschak, Blanche C., Mystical Arts of Ancient Tibet, ?

11 Huntington, John C., discussion dated May 29, 1998.

12 Willson, Martin, In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress, 22-23

13 Willson, Martin, In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress, 21-22

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Updated November 2004

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