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The Skull Cup, *thod phor* in Tibetan, is a very common symbol in Tibetan Buddhism. Signifying impermanence of life and of the body, skull cups appear in the liturgy and in the art of Tibetan Buddhism, complementing and interlinking a number of contexts with a single Buddhist truth.

As a symbol the skull cup is rich with meaning, conjuring up many levels of association and significance. Once the casing for the head of a living human being, the skull itself makes us think of death and decay. Tibetan Buddhists are also likely to imagine the charnel fields where the deceased are left to decay and hence where the skull cups are produced. These thoughts associated with the cup itself underscore the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence and thus make the cup a basic Buddhist icon.

The contents of a skull cup add another layer of associations to this already deep symbol. Most frequently the cups are filled with the sense organs of the human body. The sight of a human skull filled with sense organs creates a visceral response, reiterating the impermanence of the body and urging its viewer to resist dependence on physical sensations and desires. Other common items contained by the skull cup are the human heart and human blood, serving the same purpose.

A third level of significance is achieved when the skull cup is seen in the context of other images. One of the more common settings for the cup is in the hands of Mahakala. Since Mahakala in the overcomer of all obstacles on the way to enlightenment, the presence of the skull cup compliments his significance by emphasizing the impermanence of the body. Similarly, the skull cup is often found in the context of the Heruka deities, such as Cakra Samvara and Hevajra.

The skull cup is frequently depicted in the left hand of Padma Sambhava, signifying the guru's realization of impermanence and absolute voidness. Vajra Bhairava and dpal ldan lha mo are also frequently depicted with a skull cup filled with blood and organs for the same reason.

Skull cups have a significant role in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Very complex rituals exist describing how cups should be made, from whom, and for what ritual. Those relating to dpal ldan lha mo, for example, are made from the skull of a child born from an incestuous union. Of course, if no such skull can be found another, "ordinary" skull will take its place. It is important to note that skull cups are only made from the skulls of those who died by other causes.

Skull cups are also used for holding holy water. During Tibetan liturgy, a Lama would dip his fingers into the bowl at intervals during the service and flip the water into the air for spirits. In this case and in many others, a cup such as the one featured in this collection, made entirely of metal, can be used in place of a cup made from an actual skull.

The cup seen in this collection is fashioned entirely from copper. Its design is simple and modest,

featuring a *vishva*, or crossed *vajra* design on its upper side.

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