

VISUAL EXPRESSIONS OF TĀNTRIC BUDDHISM*

By

NANDANA CHUTIWONGS*

The term 'Tāntric Buddhism' is usually applied to a type of Buddhism in which the practice of *Tantra* plays a dominant role.

'*Tantra*', in its widest connotation, signifies expanded literature, Buddhist and Hindu, dealing elaborately with any type of study either in a theoretical or in a practical manner. In a limited usage, *Tantra* signifies a body of esoteric literature containing both religious and practical instructions. The origin of *Tantra* is neither Buddhist nor Hindu. It is just Indian. *Tantra* expounds religious methods and practices which were current in India from times immemorial. It includes the practice of *yoga* (physical and spiritual exercises), recitation of hymns and formulae, rites, rituals, medicine, astrology, magic etc. The aim is either to gain various kinds of *siddhi* (supernatural power) or to attain *mokṣa* (spiritual release). *Tantra*, as a rule, does not deal with philosophy, but only describes the practical method by which to achieve one's goal, whatever that may be.

Tāntric systems aiming at spiritual salvation lay stress on two fundamental beliefs, the origins of which date back to pre-Buddhist times:

1). The belief that Truth resides within the body of man, and that therefore the human body is the best medium through which this Truth can be realized. This belief is best expressed in the practice of *yoga* which aims to achieve the mystical union between Spirit and Matter, and the transmutation of the material into the spiritual, and the mundane into the divine. The practice of *yoga* brings man back to his origin. It reunites him with the Absolute. The spiritual and the material worlds are seen as only reflections of one another. We might think of them as the sky and its reflection in clear water. Above, is the spiritual world, the world of Salvation. Below, lies the material world of man, the world of *samsāra* (transmigration), of birth and death, of disintegration and of sorrow. Man, in our world, is but a reflection of the Absolute who resides in the upper plane. Through the practice of *yoga*, man may rise to meet his divine counterpart and origin, merge himself into the Absolute and transform his own world of transmigration into salvation, and his suffering into bliss.

* Institute of South Asian Archaeology, University of Amsterdam

* lecture delivered at the Siam Society, Bangkok, on August 22nd, 1978.

2) The concept of duality in non-duality or the concept of Two in One. There are two contrasting aspects in the fundamental nature of Reality: the static and the dynamic, the passive and the active, the negative and the positive. The realization of the Oneness of all pairs of opposites means final release or salvation, the ultimate goal of the practitioner.

Buddhism in its later phases of development absorbed much of Tāntric theory and practice. In the *Mahāyāna* system, which represents the 'un-orthodox' form of Buddhism, theological and philosophical speculations continually increased. Gradually but steadily *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in India became affected by mysticism and other ancient Indian beliefs. As early as in the 4th-5th century A.D. certain *Mahāyāna* sects had already adopted the methods of *yoga*. And after Buddhism had once admitted certain elements of these ancient practices, all the remaining traditional Indian beliefs in magic crept in. Eventually, out of this mixture of Buddhist traditions and Tāntric practices, which included all kinds of indigenous Indian elements such as esoteric *yoga*, mystic formulae, hymns, rituals, magic, sorcery and astrology, emerged Tāntric Buddhism.

Mahāyāna Buddhism developed along two main trends: those of the *Pāramitāyāna* (the Way of Perfection) and the *Vajrayāna* or *Tantrayāna* (the Way of the Thunderbolt or the Tāntric Way). The latter is popularly known as Tāntric Buddhism.

The *Pāramitāyāna* lays stress on *pāramitā* (perfection) as being the very quality which will raise a *Bodhisattva* (a person seeking Enlightenment) to the stage of a Buddha. The *Pāramitā* Path requires absolute altruism, patience, perfection of ethics, moral, concentration and intelligence. In other words, it demands perfection in every respect.

The *Vajrayāna* (or *Tantrayāna* or Tāntric Buddhism) expounds a short-cut path towards Buddhahood: a quick and effective method with the aid of esoteric practices. This method is only instructed in secret because:

1) it deals with the process of development which occurs in the innermost depth of a man's being, a process so delicate and personal that it has to be carefully guarded against all that might interfere with it.

2) it is a path open only to superior individuals who have already gone through the 'common' paths, i.e. those of the Hīnayāna and Pāramitāyāna. By having undergone these 'lower' stages of studying the scriptures and of self-purification, they have built a solid foundation of Buddhist learning. Only on this foundation can the process of *Tantra* be added. A person without such a background is unsuitable to receive Tāntric instruction, because he is unable to understand its significance. By his

lack of understanding he will devalue the instruction down to his own level or try to change it into something it can never be. In such a case, disaster would be the only outcome.

The Tāntric Way, therefore, is chiefly and basically meant for initiates. Its methods are instructed in secret by teachers to selected pupils. Non-initiates or persons who have not taken the Way seriously both with heart and soul, remain 'outsiders'. We all are outsiders. What is visible and comprehensible to us are mostly things belonging to the most peripheral borders of the Tāntric world. All that is essential *cannot be seen*.

Tāntric Buddhism adheres to the two fundamental ideas of *Tantra* which have been described earlier, i.e. the belief in the transmutation of that which is imperfect into that which is perfect, and the concept of the Oneness or Sameness of all pairs of opposites. In addition to this, Tāntric Buddhism also maintains much of the traditional Buddhist concepts though it has its own way of interpreting and expressing them.

The most important philosophical idea in Tāntric Buddhism is the concept of *Śūnyatā*—an outstandingly important subject in Buddhist philosophy. Each Buddhist system has its own definition and interpretation of *Śūnyatā*, the literal meaning of which is Void or Emptiness. Orthodox Buddhists regard it as being the very nature of the universe and of all its phenomena. The Mahāyānist describes it as the Absolute Truth, the One and Only Reality in the entire universe. Tāntric Buddhism maintains the general view of the *Mahāyāna* system and elaborates upon it. *Śūnyatā* in Tāntric Buddhism is the Origin of all things. All forms, visible and invisible, mundane and divine, are but manifestations of this *Śūnyatā* and their true nature is thus nothing but *Śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* is comparable to a mirror which reflects all forms projected upon it by the consciousness of each individual but contains no form in itself. This concept, therefore, permitted an unlimited expansion of the Tāntric pantheon which eventually came to include deities of all descriptions. Each of them is believed to be an aspect of the Ultimate One.

Equally important is the concept of *Bodhicitta*, meaning literally: a mind which is bent on Enlightenment. Un-orthodox Buddhists believe that every being in the world is a potential Buddha, but that he will never be able to proceed towards Buddhahood before he actually produces the *Bodhicitta* within himself. This *Bodhicitta*, therefore, is equivalent to a vow, a resolution to attain Buddhahood. Upon becoming conscious of this *Bodhicitta* within himself, a Buddha-to-be will eventually attain Buddhahood by progressing through the various stages of perfection

like a man mounting stairs reaches the top. But since he does not take this vow for himself but for the sake of all beings in the universe he possesses the two sublime qualities of Wisdom and Compassion. In Tāntric Buddhist philosophy, where the concept of Two in One predominates, *Bodhicitta* represents the union of these two qualities which are essential for the attainment of Buddhahood. In a mind bent on Enlightenment, there must be Wisdom as well as Compassion. There must be a *passive* Realization of the Void as well as *active* Manifestations for the benefit of all beings. The metaphysical union of these two principles may be brought about through the process of *yoga*. Remaining alone by itself the *Bodhicitta* is inactive, dull and slumbering, but through the practice of *yoga* the energies of Wisdom and Compassion flow into it, and awaken it to realize its sublime nature.

In Tāntric Buddhism there is also a strong belief in the power of chanting and repeating mystical hymns, formulae and syllables. Such a belief, in fact, was already current in India since the very beginning of her history, and it is also present among the so-called orthodox Buddhists. Nevertheless, these recitations of *mantras* or words, which are believed to contain mystical powers, are used extensively in Tāntric Buddhism. The same may be said about *mudrās* (mystic gestures) and the use of *maṇḍalas* (diagrams). But these mystical formulae, gestures, as well as all the rites, rituals and ceremonies of Tāntric Buddhism are only to be regarded as instrumental in the attainment of one's spiritual release.

The ultimate aim of Tāntric Buddhism is *nirvāṇa* (the usual Buddhist term for Spiritual Release or Salvation), and this is to be obtained through the transmutation of that which is imperfect into that which is perfect, and through the transformation of *samsāra* into *nirvāṇa* and of a man into a Buddha, an Enlightened or Liberated One. All men, in fact, are already liberated. Each is already a Buddha but he himself does not realize it because of his own mental darkness and impurities. In the personality of man there are such impure forces as Delusion, Hatred, Pride, Passion and Greed, which keep him forever bound to the round of transmigrations. These are strong forces lurking in his sub-consciousness, and they are capable of breaking through and overwhelming his consciousness at any moment. They are irrepressible and become even more dangerous and more powerful whenever they are suppressed or pushed back. They may by chance be restrained, but then only temporarily, and then only to burst out again stronger than ever. The only thing man can do to free himself from these inherent evils is to purify them, to transform their destructive forces into benevolent energies and direct these along the right channel towards the noble goal of Salvation.

Tāntric Buddhism expounds practical methods for such a purification of man and his personality; quick and effective methods through which man may regain his lost perfection. This can be done through Tāntric practice and Perfection, which is Buddhahood, can be regained now-in this life time. But the Tāntric way is difficult and its training most severe.

Initiation is most essential in the practice of *Tantra*. The Tāntric way is difficult and dangerous, so one needs the approval, guidance and supervision of a teacher at each step. In Tāntric Buddhism there are four initiations corresponding to the four grades of *Tantra*. Each initiation gives access to the practice of one particular type of *Tantra*.

The four grades of *Tantra* are:

1) *Kriyātantra*, dealing with instructions in rituals and exterior modes of worship. It is specially meant for those who are inclined to rituals, and for those who are slow in understanding and dull. This type of *Tantra* will give them blessings and some virtuous benefits, by which they may be able to purify themselves. But for those of higher intelligence, the first grade of *Tantra* represents the opening of his eye of wisdom.

2) *Caryātantra*, dealing with ceremonies, religious exercises as well as with meditation. It is described as suitable for fairly intelligent persons in whom a respect for ceremony and devotion is accompanied by a capacity for deep thinking and serious meditation.

3) *Yogatantra*

4) *Anuttarayogatantra*

The first two are known as '*External Tantras*'. The third and the fourth represent respectively a higher and the highest types of *Tantras*, known together as '*Internal Tantras*' or '*Esoteric Tantras*'. The *Yogatantra* and *Anuttarayogatantra* are only for those of strong sensibility, those endowed with high intellectual powers, and capable of great good deeds as well as of great evil deeds. They contain instructions in meditational practice and very little in ritual, aiming primarily at the unity of all aspects of the One and Only Reality. This demands intensive meditation and a constant focussing of the initiate's consciousness on that One Reality. By this permanent realization of Truth, the transmutation of *samsāra* into *nirvāṇa* is complete.

All that we as outsiders can see of Tāntric Buddhism belongs to the two lower grades, the *External Tantras*. Beyond these grades there are practically nothing to be seen or to be known. There are only things to be *experienced*, things which occur in the depth of each initiate's mind and which will remain his own personal experience.

Nevertheless, almost all that we can *see* of Tāntric Buddhism, such as its rich and complicated rituals, its images and textbooks containing instructions on rituals and on image-making—all that is essential in the first two grades of *Tantras*—involves the instructions of the great Tāntric masters of the past and of the present day. These instructions are based on personal experiences of the masters and expressed in words or in forms comprehensible to their pupils. Images of deities which we see in painting and sculpture, as well as their descriptions in ritual texts, are based on the visions of these great masters, captured in concrete or descriptive forms for the benefit of those who cannot see for themselves. These images represent the manifold forms in which the Absolute Reality or *Śūnyatā* manifested itself to the meditative masters, and are reproduced materially in lines, forms and colours visible to our eyes.

The practice of the *External Tantras* requires external objects as instruments. Rituals purify the initiates and communicate to them the capacity to receive the physical and intellectual trainings that will follow.

Images of deities play an important role both as objects of worship and as objects of meditation. The deities whom they represent bear various forms and names, but they are only different reflections of the One *Śūnyatā*, displaying forms and colours in accordance with various types of consciousnesses which have been reflected on the mirror of *Śūnyatā*. Each image, each form, each deity represents one fragment, one tiny aspect of the Absolute, and one atom of the enormous energy which pervades the universe.

These images especially serve the purpose of the practitioners of the *Kriyātantra* and *Caryātantra*. Simple devotees worship them to gain blessings, protection and good fortune. By these worshippers, deities are evoked to manifest themselves in the images, and are then praised with proper words and propitiated with proper rites. Special worship is directed towards a particular deity who has been chosen for each practitioner by his teacher. The teacher takes into consideration the character of the pupil, considers all signs and omens which have occurred during his process of initiation, and then assigns to each pupil an '*iṣṭadevatā*' (chosen deity). For those beginners who are still bound to the convention of name and form, it is absolutely impossible to get into direct contact with the Ultimate Reality which is formless. Contact can be gained only through the medium of names and forms, through an image and through a particular deity who represents that Formlessness. The nature of man is finite while the nature of the Absolute is infinite. Man never can grasp the Absolute Truth at once in all its entirety, thus only one facet, one aspect, one part of it is chosen for him by his teacher as the means to bring him to that Reality. An intimate bond between

teacher and pupil, therefore, forms the very basis of Tāntric training. The teacher knows his pupil, his background, his nature, his special merits, faults and weaknesses, and he will assign to the pupil that deity whose qualities and temperament will benefit him most. This *iṣṭadevatā* will be the pupil's guardian angel, his divine inspiration and source of power and success throughout his career. The deity will be what the initiate takes him to be. He may be a divine protector for a soul inclined to worship and devotion, but for one who feels the urge to go beyond rituals and devotions to discover the reality behind his existence, the *iṣṭadevatā* represents the way to the realization of that Truth.

Every practitioner is entitled to an *istvatā*. To simple, uncomplicated people are assigned the less complex manifestations of the Absolute, i.e. sweet-natured and compassionate deities who may be approached through love, humility and devotion. Figs. 1-4 show some of these gentle and benign aspects of the Absolute. To complicated, strong-minded and obstinate people capable of great good deeds as well of great evil deeds, are assigned powerful, ferocious and sometimes even demonic deities (see Figs. 6-9). The very obstacles which chain man to the cycle of birth and death are his own imperfections, his own unwholesome traits. Thus he must learn to look at his own faults straight in the eye. He must face the worst force within himself at its worst, so that he may know its nature, origin, tendency and strength, as if he must learn to estimate the power of his worst enemy whom he must overcome. Fig. 6 shows an image of Hevajra, the personification of the evil sentiment of Hatred. This is Hatred in its most monstrous form, Hatred at the zenith of its evil power. Hatred such as one has to face if one wants to know it and overcome it. Fig. 7 is a configuration of Yama, the god of death, representing the inborn human fear of death in its most terrifying form. One has to face one's own emotion, be it fear, hatred or passion, in this way, when it is the zenith of its hideous power. Such a force cannot be annihilated. One can only overcome it by transforming it into something beneficial. This forceful energy, when purified, may be used to enable one to achieve one's goal. But the Tāntric methods which deal with the transformation of such forces are most dangerous for untrained minds. A practitioner has to be strong enough before he begins to evoke an evil power which may prove too strong for him. If he does not know how to deal with it, he will be destroyed by it. If he is not pure enough to subdue this demon with his purity, not advanced enough in spiritual training, this demon—his own uncontrolled emotion—will consume him like a fire. This is the reason why a practitioner will always need the careful and constant supervision of his teacher, who will estimate his mental power, prescribe the appropriate Way for him and see to it that no harm will befall him.

Since everybody has his own chosen deity, uncountable images of gods and goddesses have been made, each representing a particular aspect of the Absolute who is formless, either to be worshipped or to be meditated upon as a medium by which to reach Salvation. A person may worship as many deities as he chooses, but one of them is his own personal guardian, his guide towards Salvation, and his divine counterpart with whom he will eventually merge and thereby regain his lost perfection—which is Buddhahood.

Various types of deities are assigned to various types of practitioners. In Tāntric Buddhism we may come across images of all descriptions. There are sweet, benign deities like the goddess Sītātārā (Fig. 1), the Great Mother and Protectress from all dangers; Mañjuśrī (Fig. 2) the Lord of Wisdom; the celestial Buddha Ratnasambhava (Fig. 3) who rules over the southern quarter of the universe, the element of Sensations and the particular emotion of Pride; and Amitābha (Fig. 4), the Buddha of Boundless Light and Infinite Life, the overlord of the Western Paradise, Sukhāvātī, the dreamland of all sentient beings.

Then there are deities bearing fantastic forms, like the eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara (Fig. 5), the Watchful Saviour of our time, and the Compassionate Lord who looks over all directions of the universe and pronounces a vow to save all beings from miseries.

The most complicated images are those of forceful, ferocious deities like Hevajra (Fig. 6) and Yama (Fig. 7) whom we have mentioned earlier; Hayagrīva (Fig. 8), the God with a Horse's head, a great dangerous demon to the weak, evil and unpurified mind but a powerful saviour to those who understand his nature; and Yamāntaka (Fig. 9), the ferocious manifestation of the God of Wisdom, a being most terrifying in appearance, but to initiates he is the Conqueror of the fear of death and the Destroyer of the evil darkness of Ignorance.

Deities may be represented alone, or together with their female partner, or surrounded by attendants. When a deity appears together with his partner, he is often seen in an intimate sexual union with her. Fig. 9 shows Yamāntaka and his equally terrifying partner, and in Fig. 10 we see the supreme Buddha Vajradhara and his consort locked in an intimate and loving embrace. Such a pair of god and goddess—whatever they are, whatever form they may have and whatever names may be given to them—represent the concept of duality in non-duality, or Two in One. The Absolute Reality is One, though it seems to possess two contrasting aspects. Such a pair of god and goddess stand for all pairs of opposites as known to us in our world of names and forms. All contrasting and opposite elements are meeting and melting together in

their one and same origin: *Śūnyatā*. This is an image of *saṃsāra* as well as that of *nirvāṇa*. We see here a physical union of a man and a woman as well as the spiritual unity of the Self and the Not-Self, of man and all the rest of the universe. The force which again and again turns the wheel of Creation, of birth and death, is the same force which may carry one to Salvation. This force used in a mundane way leads to generation, procreation, multiplication, transmigration and disintegration. But the same force, properly controlled and well directed, will lead to man's reintegration and the return to the sublime plane where he may regain his lost perfection and become one with the Absolute. In the Tāntric world such a concept is also expressed by the pattern of a mystical triangle (see Fig. 11). This triangle, when its apex—its aspiration—points *downwards*, means *saṃsāra* or transmigration, the disintegration, the expansion from the One to the All. But when its apex points *upwards*, it stands for the reintegration and the return of the All to the One. Then it represents *nirvāṇa*.

Important and powerful deities often appear at the centre of *maṇḍalas*, or mystical diagrams composed of figures, lines, patterns and colours (Pl. 12). In Tāntric Buddhism, a *maṇḍala* is a diagram of the universe, a geometric projection of the world reduced to an essential pattern. It unfolds the world of *saṃsāra* as well as that of *nirvāṇa*. Once again we find the scheme of the disintegration from the One into the Many, and at the same time, that of the reintegration of the Many into the One. The deity in the centre of the *maṇḍala* is man himself as well as the Absolute. By concentrating his mind on the pattern of the *maṇḍala*, by understanding its composition in quiet contemplation, man re-discovers the way to reach his secret reality which is the same as that behind the entire universe. He re-discovers himself in the centre of his own world in the form of the all-comprehending deity in the centre of the *maṇḍala*, the very point from which expansions and disintegration begin, but also the very point where all names and forms, all lines and colours, all these disintegrations flow back and become re-absorbed. After this is clear to him, he will not need the *maṇḍala*—this external object—any more, the whole structure of the universe and of his own existence will shine clearly in his mind's eyes.

Like the images of deities, *maṇḍalas* serve the purpose of the *External Tantras*. Like the images, they are objects of worship for those who are inclined to worship and rituals, representing shrines or residences of the gods. For those more inclined to meditation, they are objects of meditation and instruments for the realization of Truth through the medium of names and forms.



Fig. 1 Sītatārā. From D.I. Lauf, *Tibetan Sacred Art*, Berkeley & London, 1976, -pl. 34.



Fig. 2 Mañjuśrī. Neg. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

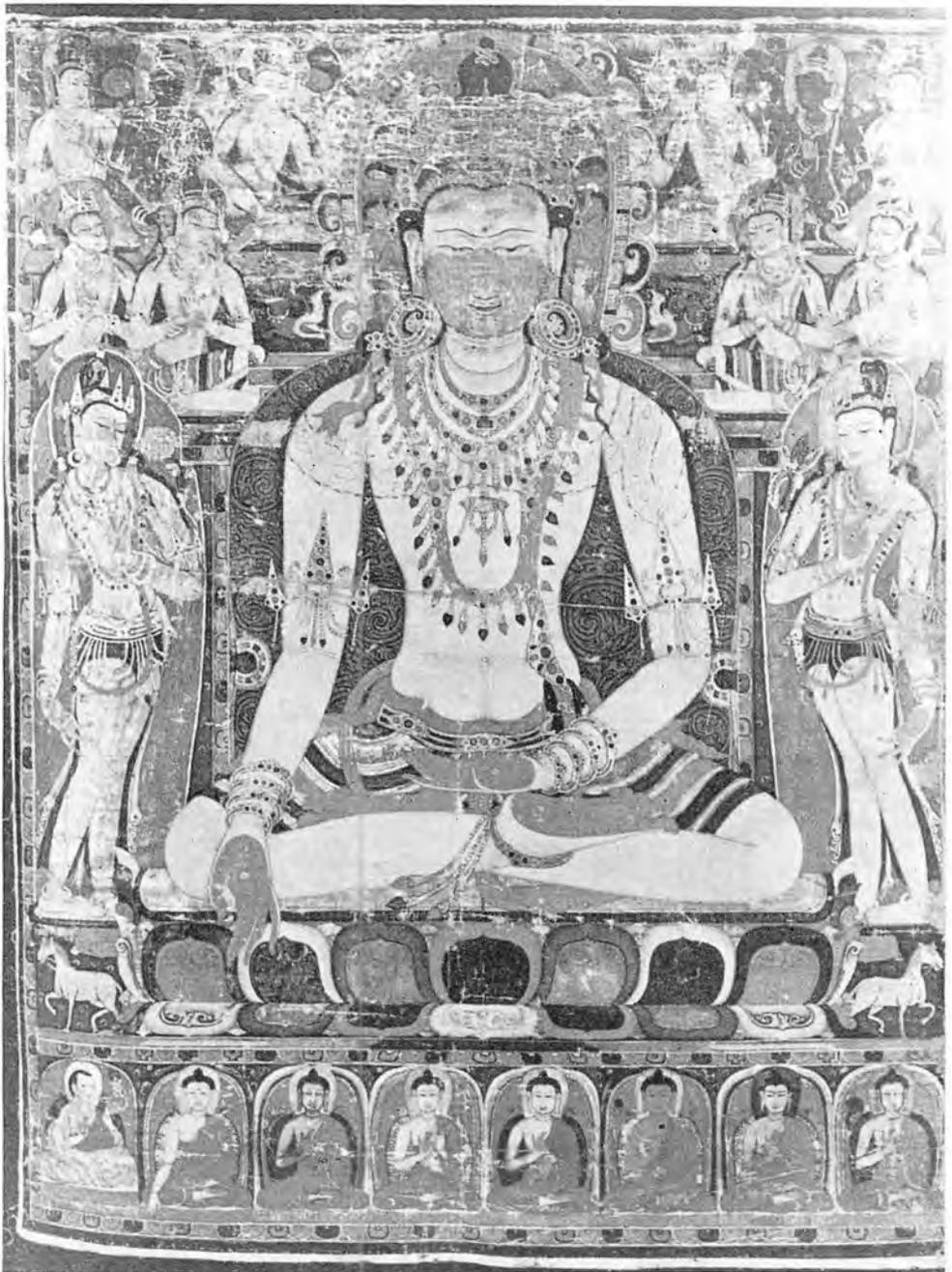


Fig. 3 Ratnasambhava. From B.C. Olschak and Geshé Thupten Wangyal, *Mystik und Kunst Alttibets*, Bern, 1972, pl. on p. 53.



Fig. 4 Amitābha. From D.I. Lauf, *Tibetan Sacred Art*, pl. 46.



Fig. 5 Avalokiteśvara. From A. Lommel, *Kunst des Buddhismus*, Zürich, 1974, pl. 99.



Fig. 6 Hevajra. Neg. S. Leksukhum, Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University.



Fig. 7. Yama. From J. van Goidsenhoven, *Art Lamaïque, art des dieux*, Bruxelles, 1970, pl. VI, 4.

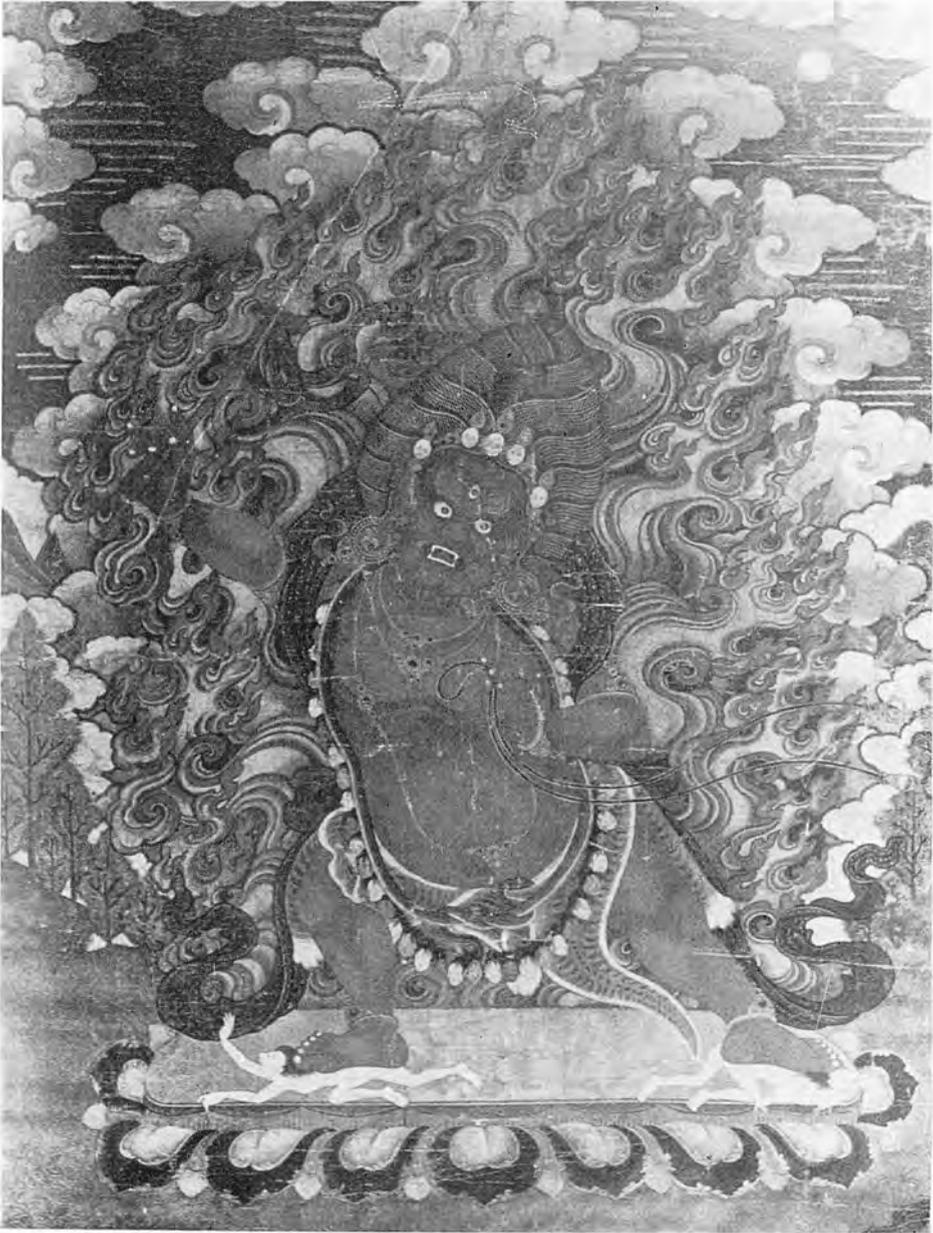


Fig. 8 Hayagriva. From F. Sierksma, *Tibet's Terrifying Deities*, The Hague/Paris, 1966, pl. 16.



Fig. 9 Yamāntaka and partner. From A. Lommel, *Kunst des Buddhismus*, pl. 109.



Fig. 10 Vajradhara and partner. From J. van Goidsenhoven, *Art lamaïque, art des dieux*, pl. 1, 2.

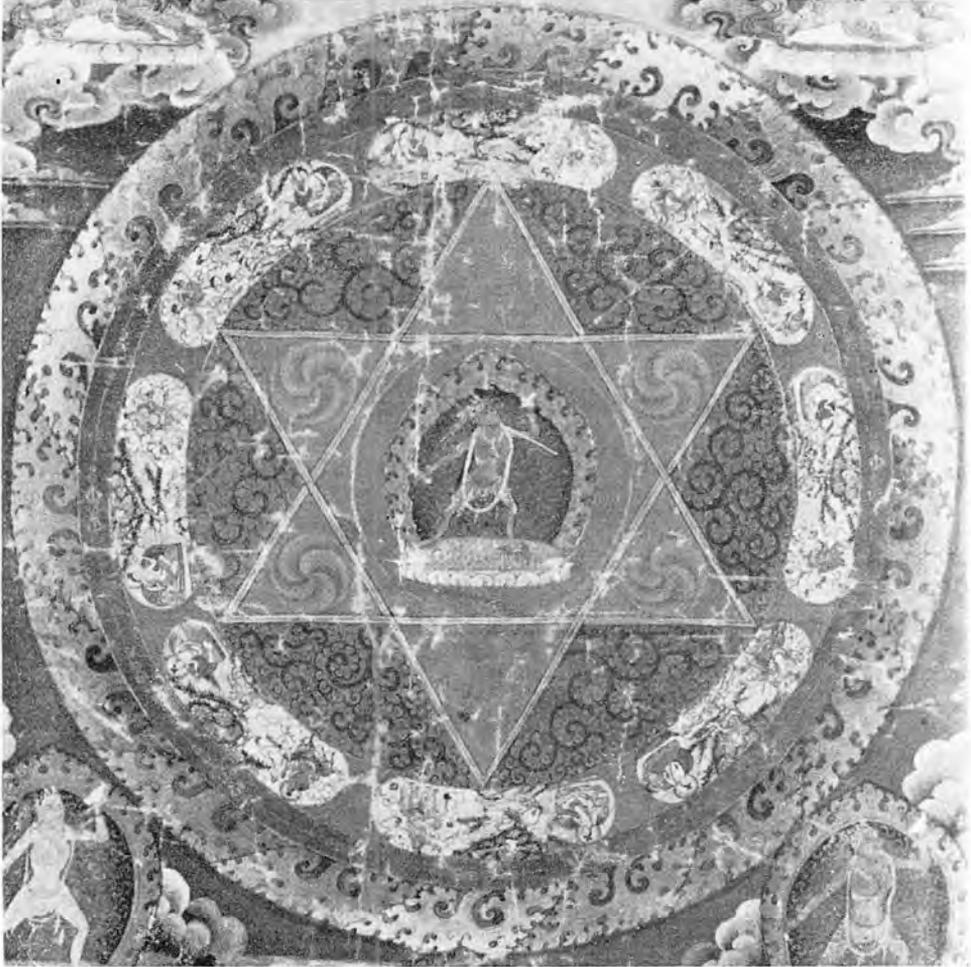


Fig. 11 *Maṇḍala of Sarvabuddhaḍākini*. From D. I. Lauf, *Tibetan Sacred Art*, pl. 54.

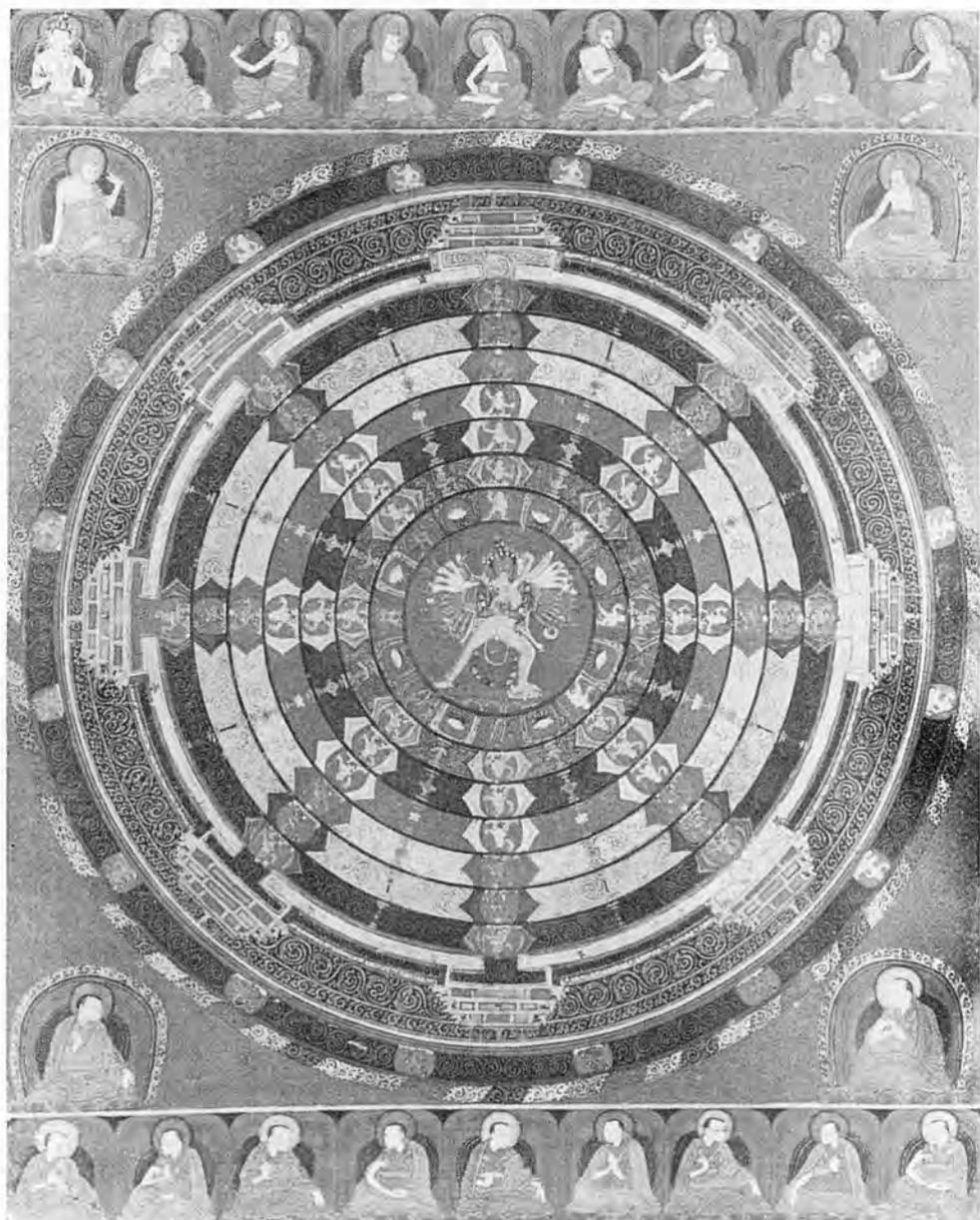


Fig. 12 *Maṅḍala of Kālācakra*. From B.C. Olschak and Geshé Thupten Wangyal, *Mystik und Kunst Alt tibets*, pl. on p. 111.

Beyond the stages of the *Kriyātantra* and *Caryātantra*, practically no external objects are needed in meditation. Instruction is given mainly on thought-creation and concentration, till the Self and the Not-Self merge together permanently in *Śūnyatā*. What follows, is the sublime experience of *Śūnyatā* which no words can describe and no form can represent.

Select Bibliography

- 1) S.B. Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tāntric Buddhism*, repr. ep., Berkeley & London, 1974.
- 2) B. Bhattacharyya, *An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism*, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, vol. XLVI, 2nd rev. ed., Varanasi, 1964.
- 3) *Tantra*, Catalogue of an exhibition with Introduction by Ph. Rawson, Art Council of Great Britain, London, 1971.
- 4) H.V. Guenther, *Treasures on the Tibetan Middle Way*, 2nd ed., Leiden, 1969.
- 5) F.D. Lessing and A. Wayman, *Fundamentals of Buddhist Tantras*, translated from the Tibetan, Indo-Iranian Monographs, vol. VIII, The Hague, 1968.
- 6) G. Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Maṇḍala*, London, 1961.
- 7) D.L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra, a Critical Study*, 2 parts, London Oriental Series, vol. 6, repr. ed., London, 1971.