

Yeshe Tsogyal: Symbol of Female Enlightenment, Empowerment and Soteriological Androgyny

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Abstract

Symbols have always been an integral part of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism and serve as powerful catalysts to train the mind towards enlightenment. As such, feminine symbolism, either in the form of *ḍākinīs* (Tib: *mkha' 'gro ma*), female meditational deities (Tib: *yidam*), legendary, historical or contemporary female masters have and continue to serve as potent objects of inspiration to Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners, especially women.

This paper discusses the relationship between the enlightenment of a great female Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist master, Yeshe Tsogyal (Tib: *Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal*) and the ideal of soteriological androgyny. The concept of soteriological androgyny, as propounded by Sponberg¹ is that enlightenment is beyond the dichotomies of gender. Yet, this paper also argues that feminine symbols of enlightened personalities have a profound psychological impact on female practitioners. Hence, although enlightenment is a gender-neutral state, women still need potent feminine symbols to deconstruct gender barriers which inhibit women from realizing their full spiritual potential.

This paper journeys into the life of Yeshe Tsogyal, Tibet's most loved and famous female enlightened master to understand the ways in which she practiced the path to enlightenment in order to establish the relationship between her spiritual attainments and the element of soteriological androgyny—the ultimate irrelevance of gender.

Introduction

Yogīc Buddhism is filled with tantric symbolism, much of it in feminine aspect which serves to bridge the gender gap created in institutionalised Buddhism. Much of the symbolism or imagery in yogīc Buddhism is related to the *ḍākinī* symbolism. I am focusing on the *ḍākinī*

¹ Alan Sponberg, Attitudes Toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism. In J. Cabezon, *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992), p. 26.

symbolism because it is the door to the Dharma for female practitioners. As such, all Vajrayāna Buddhist practices are aimed at training the practitioner to have a direct realization or insight into one's primordial nature of mind which is essentially pure, free from afflictions and all forms of dualities, including gender. Therefore, any of the practices in Vajrayāna, though they begin with gendered symbolism, ultimately culminate in the transcendence of the duality of masculine/feminine. Though the protagonist in this paper, Yeshe Tsogyal (Tib: *Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal*) began as an ordinary woman who relied on female imagery such as Mother Prajñāpāramitā/Samantabhadri, she eventually transcended all forms of symbols and labels. She realized the emptiness of inherent existence and transcended dualistic tendencies of the mind, thereby confirming Sponberg's assertion that the high level of realisations of female Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist masters is due to the ideal of soteriological androgyny, embedded in practices based on Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka view of emptiness.

The *ḍākinī* Symbol

In Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, the *ḍākinī* is a powerful and profound symbol of the true nature of mind. In general, there are two types of *ḍākinī*, the worldly *ḍākinī* and wisdom *ḍākinī*.

A *ḍākinī*, in its most common form is understood as a female manifestation of an enlightened being. In the biographies of Vajrayāna Buddhist masters, she has played various roles, including that of external instructor of the secret Vajrayāna teachings, one who empowers the practitioner in meditation and protector of the tantric lineages to ensure that only those with the purest motivation are able to penetrate their essence. On a deeper level, she is none other than a personification of the tantric practitioners own body and innate wisdom mind.

The *ḍākinī* which is the essence of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practice is the wisdom *ḍākinī*. The wisdom *ḍākinī* is synonymous with the feminine principle, which is the primordial wisdom mind. As Tilopa explained to Naropa:

Look into the mirror of your mind,
which is *Mahāmudrā*,
the mysterious home of the *ḍākinī*²

² Simmer-Brown, p. 96.

The *ḍākinī* is a creative and powerful metaphor of transformation of the tantric practitioner’s gross conceptual mind into wisdom realizing emptiness. The wisdom or more specifically, secret *ḍākinī* or the ‘mother principle’ is referred to as the Great Mother (Tib: *Yum Chenmo*); the *Dharmakāya* Great Mother (Skt: *Prajñāpāramitā*; Tib: *Chöku Yum Chenmo*), Mother of All the Buddhas (Tib: *Gyalkun gyi-yum*) or as the All-Creating Sovereign (Tib: *Kun gyi Gyalpo* or *Gyalmo*). All these different names for the secret *ḍākinī* refer to the emptiness of self and phenomena and the wisdom that sees things as they really are. Simmer-Brown³ quotes Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche thus,

Knowing the nature of emptiness nondualistically is liberation.

Whether you call it emptiness, the absolute, or the *ḍākinī* makes no difference.

All are liberating.

Mother⁴ *Prajñāpāramitā* is known as the mother of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This is because, firstly, she is the ground of all realization, i.e. emptiness itself. Secondly, she is the wisdom⁵ that realizes emptiness (Skt: *prajñā*, Tib: *shes rab*) of self and phenomena. She is synonymous with the buddha-nature (Skt: *tathāgatagarbha*; Tib: *desheg nyingpo* (*bde gshegs snying po*))—the womb⁶ of all Buddhas precisely because it is the ground from which all Buddhas arise. For the tantric practitioner, Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*, the secret *ḍākinī* is both the true nature of one’s mind—the buddha-nature itself and also the practitioner’s own realization of the non-dual and essentially empty nature of one’s primordial mind.

In the Nyingma school, the source of all enlightenment is Samantabhadri (Tib: *kuntuzangmo*), the consort and counterpart of the primordial Buddha of the Nyingma tradition, Samantabhadra (Tib: *kuntuzangpo*). Samantabhadri represents the “formless space of wisdom, the *dharmakāya* dimension of Buddhahood in whom delusion and conceptual thought have never arisen” and is the primary symbol of the awareness-wisdom aspect of mind.⁷ Both Mother

³ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴ Due to its maternal connotation, in later perfection of wisdom *sūtras*, the Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* is depicted as a female deity and venerated in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

⁵ Also referred to as ‘penetrating insight’.

⁶ Since phenomena are not created, therefore, Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* should not be taken literally as a being who gives birth to a progeny. Rather, she is the symbolic ‘mother’, i.e. without whom; there would be no buddhas and bodhisattvas because without wisdom realizing emptiness, it is not possible to achieve buddhahood

⁷ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. 97.

Prajñāpāramitā and Samantabhadri are none other than the most subtle aspect of the *ḍākinī*—secret *ḍākinī*. Thus, all practices in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, including the various *ḍākinī* manifestations have only one aim, to uncover the secret *ḍākinī* which is one's ultimate nature of mind.

Contrary to traditional norms, the *ḍākinī* is not a gendered symbol and is not confined to the feminine. Though the *ḍākinī* expresses the feminine gender at the relative level, at the ultimate level, the *ḍākinī* is a symbol of egolessness—beyond gender. Simmer-Brown⁸ quotes Nāgārjuna thus:

Because the expanse of reality is not "I",
It is not a "woman," not a "man."
It is completely freed from all grasping.
How could it be designated as an "I"?
In all phenomena without attachment
Neither woman, nor man [are] conceived.
To tame those who are blinded by desire
A "woman" and a "man" are taught.

The secret *ḍākinī*, synonymous with Mother Prajñāpāramitā, is the ultimate symbol of soteriological androgyny, beyond gender. Thus, the premise of this paper is that because of the nondual nature of gendered symbolism such as Mother Prajñāpāramitā that many women such as Yeshe Tsogyal who followed the Vajrayāna path have realized their true nature mind, attained enlightenment and completely transcended all dualities, including preoccupations with gender.

Yeshe Tsogyal—Feminine Symbol of Perseverance

Yeshe Tsogyal (777-837 C.E), the great Tibetan *yogini* was a princess, born into the Kharchen family. Her father was Namkhai Yeshe and mother, Gewa Bum. She was a heart disciple of Guru Padmasambhava, who prophesied her birth as one who would play an instrumental role in assisting him to establish and propagate the dharma in Tibet. Yeshe Tsogyal

⁸ Simmer Brown, p. 81.

accomplished complete enlightenment and was responsible for preserving the rarest teachings of the dharma.⁹

Yeshe Tsogyal holds a special place for women in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, especially those of the Nyingma. Yeshe Tsogyal is not only remembered as a human female master, but she is also a tantric Buddhist meditational deity¹⁰. Yeshe Tsogyal is deeply revered and supplicated in tantric rituals as exemplified in the *Longchen Nyingthik* tradition supplication below:

In the center of that palace,
Upon the pistil of a blooming lotus
On a sun-seat is the chief of the *ḍākinīs*,
[Who is] Samantabhadri in the vast expanse of dharmakaya¹¹,
Vajravarahi in the field of sambhogakaya and
Yeshe Tsogyal in the form of nirmanakaya¹²

Yeshe Tsogyal's life story is a poignant example of a young woman struggling desperately against the social pressures of her time. Her father insisted on her marriage despite her spiritual inclinations. In her bid to escape marriage, she was subjected to severe brutality. She was brutally raped by her first suitor and fought off the second. When she fled from the latter, she was taken and placed in King Trisong Deutsen's harem who later offered her as a consort¹³ to Guru Padmasambhava¹⁴. The verse below is Yeshe Tsogyal's account to Guru

⁹ Simmer Brown, p. 81.

¹⁰ Yeshe Tsogyal has numerous manifestations as a meditational deity, such as Sarasvati (Tib: Yangchenma), White Tārā (Tib: Drolma Karmo), Vajrayoginī or Vajravarahi, who are two aspects of the most important *ḍākinī* in the Tibetan tantric system

¹¹ Powers, p. 129. An enlightened person attains total omniscience unhindered by any obstructions or limitations and is able to manifest three bodies: (1) the truth body (Tib: *chos kyi sku*, Skt: *dharmakāya*); (2) the complete enjoyment body (Tib: *longs spyod pa'i sku*, Skt: *sambhogakāya*); and (3) emanation bodies (Tib: *sprul sku*, Skt: *nirmāṇakāya*).¹¹ The *dharmakāya* refers to a buddha's omniscient consciousness, and the second is the emptiness of that consciousness. The *sambhogakāya* is a pure form (said in Tibetan Buddhism to be produced from subtle energies called "winds" in conjunction with consciousness), which resides in a pure land. *Nirmāṇakāya* are physical manifestations that buddhas create in order to benefit sentient beings.

¹² Simmer Brown, p. 89.

¹³ Keith Dowman, *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*. (New York: Snow Lion, 1996), p. 160.

¹⁴ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. xxx.

Padmasambhava of her trials and tribulations as a female who deeply aspired to pursue the spiritual path:

I am a timid woman and of scant ability; of lowly condition, the butt of everyone. If I go for alms, I am set upon by dogs; if food and riches come my way, I am the prey of thieves; since I am beautiful, I am the quarry of every lecherous knave; if I am busy with much to do, the country folk accuse me; if I don't do what they think I should, the people criticize; if I put a foot wrong, everyone detests me. I have to worry about everything I do. That is what it is like to be a woman! How can a woman possibly gain accomplishment in Dharma? Just managing to survive is already hard enough.¹⁵

Many women, even today, can deeply identify with the suffering that Yeshe Tsogyal endured. However, Yeshe Tsogyal's story is not one of resignation and despair. On the contrary, she proved that women in dire situations can turn their lives around and not only transcend their unfortunate circumstances but attain high spiritual realizations on the spiritual path. Due to her amazing attainments, she became guru to scores of disciples in the Himalayan region, both men and women, lay and monastic. Among her notable female disciples were Trashi Chidren, Kalasiddhi, Shelkar Dorje Tso, Lodro Kyi and the innumerable nuns of the monasteries that Tsogyal founded and supported.

The First Enlightened Tibetan—A Woman!

Yeshe Tsogyal is probably the first Tibetan to attain Buddhahood.¹⁶ This assertion is extremely important as it shows that a woman was the first enlightened master in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. Yet, the status of women in the tradition today does not correspond to the great achievement of Yeshe Tsogyal. Women in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism have to be convinced through studies like this that women too can be enlightened. Some authors suggest that Yeshe Tsogyal was already enlightened and took human form to manifest Buddhahood once again for the purpose of spreading the Vajrayāna teachings in Tibet. However, according to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Simmer Brown, p. 254.

Changchub and Nyingpo, Guru Padmasambhava, in his final teaching to Yeshe Tsogyal explicitly states that Yeshe Tsogyal gained enlightenment in a female body:

In the supreme body of a woman you have gained accomplishment;
Your mind itself is Lord; request him for empowerment and blessing.
There is no other regent of the Lotus Guru.¹⁷

We know about Yeshe Tsogyal's life from a *terma* (dharma treasure) called *Lady of the Lotus-Born* concealed in the eighth century C.E. by the highly realized disciples of Guru Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyal herself, Namkhai Nyingpo and Gyalwa Changchub. This text was discovered almost a thousand years later (seventeenth century) by a *terton* called Taksham Samten Lingpa, who deciphered the *ḍākinī* script and rendered this text intelligible for us.¹⁸

Yeshe Tsogyal is known to have proclaimed her enlightened state on numerous occasions. First, at Paro Takstang when she went to meet Guru Padmasambhava with five disciples after attaining enlightenment:

Emaho!
.....Now I have attainment in the Secret *Mantras*.
I have gained the powers of the eight great siddhis
And am mistress of the *sūtras* and the tantras—
Even with the lowly body of a woman.
Thus is my good fortune excellent!

My form has now become the deity:
Ordinary perception now has vanished totally,
Mirage-like absorption now has dawned.
The elements are subject to my power.
My speech to *mantra* has been turned;

¹⁷ Changchub & Nyingpo, p. xx.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

The babbling of useless talk has faded
And the vajra-like absorption has arisen.
Of all the Dharmas of the *sūtra* and the *mantra* I have now the mastery.
My mind becoming Buddha,
Common thoughts have vanished into space;
"Heroic fearlessness" has dawned upon me.
My mind is now identical with Vajradhara.¹⁹

In her parting words to her eleven root disciples before departing for the pure land of Orgyen, Yeshe Tsogyal once again affirmed that she had indeed attained enlightenment in a woman's body.

So it was with me, this woman, Tsogyal.
I longed to be enlightened, but until I gained
Perfection in the practice, I was forced to bide my time.
Creation and Perfection and the Great Perfection,
All is mastered now,
And this, my form of flesh, is melting into light.
Now I pass into the presence of the Lord of Orgyen,
But yet will leave you with these words of legacy.²⁰

Yeshe Tsogyal, I, a woman,
Through the blessing of the Guru's love,
Have now the fruit complete in all its strength.
Tomorrow I will go away to Orgyen.²¹

¹⁹ Changchub & Nyingpo, pp. 92-93.

²⁰ Changchub & Nyingpo, p. 178.

²¹ Ibid., p. 176.

The Indian Princess Mandāra, the first consort of Guru Padmasambhava once visited Yeshe Tsogyal and stayed with her for several days, requesting teachings from the latter as well as giving teachings to Yeshe Tsogyal. Before departing, Princess Mandāra uttered the following verse which affirms Yeshe Tsogyal’s attainment of the state of Mother Prajñāpāramitā:

Kyeho!

Accomplished in the Secret *Mantra*, Dancer in the sky,

Wonder-worker who dissolved her impure form

Into the sphere of purity,

You drank the nectar of the teachings

Of the Lotus-Born

And gathered all their essence—

Great Mother, Wisdom that has gone beyond,

Is this not yourself?²²

Also, Yeshe Tsogyal’s status as an enlightened being can be deduced based on her biography which says that “the main work of encoding, writing, and concealing the Treasures was entrusted to Yeshe Tsogyal, and this indeed was one of her greatest responsibilities and gifts to later generations of Buddhist practitioners”.²³ Dodrup Tenpai Nyima explains that beings who are able to reveal dharma treasures (Tib: *terma*) must have at least the realization of the completion²⁴ stage practices. He added that the “one who originates the Treasures must have the supreme attainment of Buddhahood”.²⁵ Hence, since Yeshe Tsogyal wrote most of the *termas* by herself, she is definitely a fully-enlightened being.

²² Changchub & Nyingpo, p. 164.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.

²⁴ Deity yoga practice in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism is generally divided into two, the generation stage (Skt: *utpattikrama*, Tib: *skyes-rim*) and completion stage (Skt: *sampannakrama*, Tib: *dzogs-rim*).

²⁵ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. xxxvii.

Yeshe Tsogyal's Path to Enlightenment and Rainbow Body

Having established that Yeshe Tsogyal attained enlightenment in a female body, it is imperative to discuss the practices this great female master did that culminated in her attainment of Buddhahood. According to her biography, Yeshe Tsogyal practiced the complete Buddhist path, in particular, the Dzogchen teachings and herself became a Guru of great power and wisdom. Guru Padmasambhava gave Yeshe Tsogyal an exposition of Guru Yoga²⁶, “the meditative practice of union with the Guru, the single most powerful and important practice in the entire range of Buddhist teaching”.²⁷ She was a holder of the complete transmission of the so-called Hīnayāna²⁸ and Mahāyāna doctrines. Her heart practice is associated with the three inner tantras of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga,²⁹ of the Great Perfection or Dzogchen practice. Yeshe Tsogyal practiced the eight austerities³⁰ and heat yoga (Tib: *tummo*³¹). Above all, she practiced bodhicitta³² in every aspect of her practice, finally conjoining it with wisdom realizing emptiness, as evident in her own account of the instructions that Guru Padmasambhava gave to her that led to her enlightenment state³³.

The great *ḍākinī*, Mother Prajñāpāramitā herself, Yeshe Tsogyal, lived until age two hundred and eleven, bringing immense benefit to the people of Tibet, leaving behind a circle of great enlightened disciples, both male and female. She is remembered in history as a key figure in the introduction and consolidation of Buddhist teachings in Tibet, being Guru Padmasambhava's dharma regent, whom the Guru entrusted as a guru for the Tibetans to complete his work in establishing and spreading the Buddhadharma in Tibet. This great female master firmly established Buddhism in Tibet, propagated the teachings and built up the capacity

²⁶ Ibid., p. 232. Guru Yoga, Skt. (*bla ma'i rnal'byor*, Tib.) ‘is the most important practice in tantric Buddhism, consisting of the visualization of the Guru, prayers and requests for blessing, the reception of these blessings, and the merging of the mind with the Guru's enlightened wisdom mind’.

²⁷ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. xx.

²⁸ Hīnayāna: A pejorative term used to refer to the 'simpler or lesser vehicle', N. of the earliest system of Buddhist doctrine. Used here for want of a better word.

²⁹ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. xxiv. Yeshe Tsogyal alternates the words Ati, the View and Mahāmudrā, all pointing to the practice leading to and the ultimate realisation of the secret *ḍākinī*, the Mother Prajñāpāramitā, the ultimate nature of mind, which is free of dualistic conceptions, including gender.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 72. The three austerities of clothing, food, and nourishment; three of body, speech, and mind, hardships for the sake of Buddha's Doctrine and all wandering sentient beings; and, the burden of compassion, holding others dearer than oneself.

³¹ Tummo (*gtum mo*, Tib.). Inner heat generated in the course of a certain yogic practice of the same name, belonging to the level of Anuyoga.

³² The mind which wishes to attain enlightenment for all sentient beings, not for oneself alone.

³³ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. 70.

of the lay and monastic communities in Tibet through her exposition of *sūtra* and tantra teachings. Yeshe Tsogyal concealed six hundred and thirty-one dharma treasures (Tib: *gterma*) in thirty-five major places, most of them in Tibet which she herself penned down for future treasure revealers (Tib: *gter-ston*) to discover.³⁴ She even instructed the king of Tibet and had a wide circle of disciples. After guiding many disciples on the Buddhist path, she left her worldly abode to join her Guru in the pureland of Orgyen, a *nirmāṇakāya* (Tib: *sprul sku*) pure realm with two of her female disciples, Trashi Chidren (Tib: *bkra shis mkhas sgron*)³⁵, the girl from Mon (Bhutan) and Kalasiddhi³⁶ of Nepal. Yeshe Tsogyal's biography describes her last moments on earth whereby her body gradually vanished into thin air, a sign of full attainment of the rainbow body³⁷:

When she had finished speaking, Tsogyal became radiant with beams of five-colored brilliance difficult to look upon. She dissolved into a sphere of deep blue light, resembling a sesame pod in shape, and disappeared. The four *ḍākinīs* took the lotus by its petals and raised the shimmering light higher and higher into the air until it vanished.

Kyema Ho!

Kyema! Hear me, faithful people of Tibet.

Yeshe Tsogyal, I the great enlightened one,

Have withdrawn my impure form into unsullied space.

I am now a Buddha in the utter sphere of Lotus Light.

...I, the Buddha Yeshe Tsogyal,

Purged the elements' uncleanness and have gone into the sky.

Through wondrous emanations I will tend the good of beings.

³⁴ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. xxxiv.

³⁵ Changchub and Nyingpo, p. 198. With her right hand, Yeshe Tsogyal transformed Tashi Chidren into a blue utpala lotus with eight petals marked with the syllables *Hung* and *Phat*, and dissolved into the right side of Yeshe Tsogyal's heart.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 198. With her left hand, Tsogyal touched Kalasiddhi of Nepal, who changed into a red lotus of sixteen petals marked with the sixteen vowels and *Hri* and dissolved into the left side of her heart.

³⁷ A fully enlightened person who also liberates the body into light. There are 3 levels of the Rainbow body: Rainbow body, Rainbow body of light and Rainbow body of great transference.

Therefore do not grieve; be filled with joy!

Conclusion

Yeshe Tsogyal was a foremost Tibetan female enlightened master who had and continues to inspire scores of people in the Himalayan region. She is remembered in various ways; as a meditational deity or as a living female master who attained full enlightenment in a female body. During her lifetime, Yeshe Tsogyal's religious instructions culminated in full enlightenment for many of her students, including female disciples such as Trashi Chidren and Kalasiddhi. Since her heart practice which led to her enlightenment was Dzogchen, therefore, her instructions to her disciples were all within the Nyingma system of tantric practices which was the only extant school of Tibetan Buddhism then. Although Yeshe Tsogyal herself and her students began the Vajrayāna path using feminine symbols such as Mother Prajñāpāramitā and Samantabhadri, their attainment of Buddhahood transcended all forms of duality, including gender, thereby corresponding to Sponberg's 'soteriological androgyny', rendering the dichotomies of male-female completely irrelevant in spiritual practice.

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