

ABOUT TARA

WHO IS TARA?

Tara is the best-known and most beloved feminine deity of Tibetan Buddhism. In the remote past, she is said to have taken a vow to help and save others while remaining always in female form – not an easy thing to do in the male-dominated culture of old India. Because of this vow, Tara is especially loved by women around the world, who reach out to her because she promises compassionate healing, long life, and protection from what is known as the “eight fears” to everyone who calls on her. These fears are challenges that a spiritual practitioner faces. Specifically – how to overcome Anger, Jealousy, Pride, Doubt, Obsession, Greed, Ignorance and Distorted Views. Men are also devoted to Tara, of course, including many of Tibet’s highest lamas.

You may be wondering, “Is Tara real?” And “Why should she want to help me?” Before we answer these questions, let’s look carefully for a moment at an image of Tara. Imagine that what you see there is not simply a two dimensional image made of paint and canvas, but an actual loving being made of compassion, who is capable of reaching all of your unhealed places and the wisdom to know exactly what to do to help you.

So, because you are seeking blessings and benefits for yourself, you entertain the idea that there are divine beings who are completely dedicated to helping you and that Tara is one of them. Remind yourself it is to your own advantage to perceive Tara as a wise being with the capability to help you, because that perception offers the maximum benefit from the meditations.

TARA’S STORY

Like other Buddhist deities, Tara is a manifestation of the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha. She is considered the mother of all the Buddhas. You might say that Tara is the feminine principle of the Buddha. Her name is sometimes translated as “star”, but it is usually explained as meaning “she who saves.” Tara is loved and honored throughout the Buddhist world. In Tibet she is known as Dolma. In China, she is called Kwan Yin. The Japanese tradition calls her Kannon.

There are many stories told about Tara’s origins. One story is that Tara was born from a lotus that grew from a tear shed by Avalokitesvara, who is a manifestation of the infinite compassion of the Buddha.

Another legend tells us that Tara was once a human princess called Moon of Wisdom. Devoted to the Buddha of that long-ago time, she made offerings and practiced meditation with sincere faith. Recognizing her spiritual development, some monks in the temple where she meditated urged her to pray to be reborn in a male body so as to more easily achieve enlightenment.

She responded by saying

*Here there is no man, there is no woman,
No self, no person, and no consciousness.
Labeling “male” or “female” has no essence,
but deceives the evil-minded world.*

Having revealed her understanding that all categories and all distinctions - male or female, self or others— is ultimately a false perception, Tara made her vow to counteract the prevailing patriarchal delusion and said:

“Until every being without exception is enlightened, I shall work for the benefit of all in a woman’s body.”

You could consider Tara as a feminist pioneer - a warrior goddess who took a courageous stand against the prevailing cultural belief that women are inferior. Her attributes and qualities have reminded people for thousands of years of the importance of the feminine viewpoint, and that it is essential to recognize and express its value.

TARA AS GODDESS

Like goddesses in other traditions, Tara is described as a mother, a virgin, and a queen. Like a mother, her love is unconditional, and she is always available. Think for a moment of mothers you have known, or of yourself as a mother if you have children. When a child cries in the night, or when a child is hurt, or ill, or in danger, a mother’s response is immediate and powerful. Tara’s compassion is the like that. When we cry out to her as a Mother Goddess, she responds as if each of us are her only and beloved child.

Like a virgin, Tara is whole and complete in herself. She does not require anything from us - not gifts nor devotion. Fully enlightened beings like Tara have developed to their maximum extent all good qualities – generosity, moral virtue, infinite patience, focused attention, the enthusiastic wish to help, and the ability to see things exactly as they are. Likewise, she has completely eliminated all negative qualities. Tara never gets angry with us; she is never jealous or lazy or greedy or disappointed. Her wisdom is pure, absolute and unlimited.

Like a queen, Tara is noble and generous. She is unwavering in her capacity to uphold the sovereign responsibility to end the suffering of every living being. Like a wise ruler, she is completely selfless. All her care and concern, all her time, effort, and resources, are totally dedicated to guiding and protecting the beings under her charge. She sits on her lotus throne with regal beauty and dignity, and her actions on behalf of those who depend on her are courageous, swift, and fearless.

These attributes might remind you of other goddesses and you’d be right to think of Tara as having the motherly care of Demeter, the virgin autonomy of Artemis, the queenly wisdom of Athena, the great power of Innana, and the deep wisdom of Hecate. However, as a fully enlightened Buddha, Tara lacks any of the shadows that might trail the more human-seeming

goddesses found in mythology. Like Mary as Queen of Heaven, she is dignified and fearless, and she appears to those who call on her in a form that is both beautiful and approachable.

DO I HAVE TO BECOME BUDDHIST?

Have you ever gone with a friend to a religious service quite different from your own tradition? Though you probably stood up when the congregation did or covered your head if that was the prevailing custom, you might have felt slightly disconnected from it all, as if the words of the prayers and rituals being performed had little to do with you.

Buddhism need not be approached as a “religion” in that way. It doesn’t demand that you attend church every Sunday or that you eat only certain foods. Buddhism is based on three simple principles: avoid what is negative or hurtful, cultivate what is positive or helpful, and watch your mind. Of course, many who consider themselves Buddhists make personal commitments to meditate or say certain prayers each day. But they do these things by their own choice and for their own benefit, not because Buddha or a religious authority requires them to do so.

So, the short answer is no, you do not need to become a Buddhist to meditate on Tara or to benefit from doing so. Another difference between Buddhism and other religions is that there is no doctrine of exclusivity, no heaven from which non-believers are barred. Buddha, Tara, and all the enlightened beings have vowed to help and protect every being, whatever their chosen faith or belief.

When you sit down to meditate on Tara, the first thing you’ll be asked to do is to visualize an image of Tara sitting in front of you and “take refuge” in her and in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma (which refers to the Buddha’s teachings), and Sangha (which is the community of Buddhist practitioners). Though the refuge ceremony is the doorway to becoming a Buddhist, you can think of your refuge as acknowledging your desire to avoid what is negative, cultivate what is positive, and watch your mind. Moreover, the word Buddha means “enlightened.” Whatever spiritual being you regard as enlightened is, in that sense, Buddha - and that can include Jesus, Allah, or any other divine being who is compassionate, free from all problems, and totally capable of helping you develop spiritually.

When you recite the refuge prayer, you are also taking refuge in your own “future Buddha”- the enlightened being you are destined to become; in the spiritual development that grows in you through meditation and in your friends on the spiritual path who support your aspirations.

WHY WOULD TARA WANT TO HELP ME?

Tara wants to help you because of her limitless compassion and love. Compassion is being totally dedicated to relieving suffering. That suffering could be a physical or emotional pain – such as those that might be caused by illness, the death of a loved one, or even that first gray

hair you see in the mirror. Or it could simply be the recognition that no matter what you do, you can't hold on to happiness.

The truth is, whatever you believe is essential to your happiness - a relationship, a possession, a job - it won't last forever, or your feelings about it will change. We know intellectually that everything is always changing - friends turn away, your new car gets a scratch, your birthday comes around quicker every year - but still we try desperately and fearfully to hold on. Because we do, we suffer. Tara understands this. Her compassion is aimed at healing and enabling you to relax a little bit and let go.

So what kind of love is it that Tara offers? Sometimes when people say, "I love you", they're really saying, "I want to control you", or "I want you to be happy with *me*." But what if in order to be truly happy, the friend you love finds that he needs to move on? Would your love extend that far? Tara's does. Her love is totally selfless. It is dedicated not to serving her own happiness, but to increasing yours!

Think for a moment of what the world would be like if everyone's love was as selfless as that. Parents would understand that what makes them happy might not be the best for their kids. Partners and friends would value each other's happiness more than their own. It's a lovely picture. It's the way the enlightened beings behave and is a wise kind of loving we can all aspire to emulate.

There is a beautiful prayer called The Four Immeasurables that many Buddhists recite each day. It expresses the wish that each of us experience the immeasurable love and compassion that Tara feels. In the last line you ask that beings enjoy a balanced mind, free from the sticky pull of attachment and the angry push of hatred. When you say these words, keep in mind that "All beings" definitely includes you:

May all beings have happiness
May they free from suffering
May they find the joy that has never known suffering
May they be free from attachment and hatred.

REACHING OUT TO TARA THROUGH MEDITATION

There are many ways to meditate. Some methods encourage you to focus - to hold an image in your mind's eye or put your attention on a sensation like breathing and train your mind to keep that point of focus sharp and clear. Buddhists call this kind of meditation *shamata*, or concentrated meditation.

Another kind of meditation encourages you to think about things in a disciplined way, to ask yourself questions and analyze what's true about yourself and your situation. This kind is called vipasyana, or analytical meditation. With this practice, you'll have the opportunity to use both types of meditation to reach out to Tara. You'll also be introduced to mantra meditation and experience how chanting Tara's mantra can help bring you closer to her.

MEDITATING ON TARA'S IMAGE

The images of Buddhist deities are like a spiritual code. Each aspect of the way Tara appears in traditional paintings and statues has a special meaning. As you study her image and think about the significance of each detail, you are actually engaging in analytical meditation. When you close your eyes and build up Tara's form in your imagination, remembering the meaning of those details while training yourself to hold the image strongly and clearly, you are combining analytical and concentrated meditation. This combination is particularly powerful and transformative.

CREATING A MENTAL IMAGE OF TARA

Take a few minutes and really study Tara's image. As you look at each detail, try to remember its meaning. When you have some sense of the whole image, close your eyes and bring up a mental image of Tara in your imagination. Creating an image in your mind's eye and using it as a focus for meditation is called *visualization*, which is an important technique in many Tibetan Buddhist practices.

It's best to visualize Tara as three-dimensional and life-sized. You want to see her not as a painting or a statue, but as a real living being, made of light, who is delighted to appear in front of you, ready and willing to provide whatever comfort and help you need.

There are some people who have no problem visualizing complex images. Others have tremendous difficulty "seeing" anything. Actually, it's less important what you *see* when you close your eyes than what you *feel*. If all you see is a glowing white lump, but your heart tells that lump is an actual living Tara who has come at your request in order to help you, your meditation will work out just fine.

Go easy on yourself and build up your visualized image bit by bit over a number of sessions. Some people start by seeing an overall picture and then fill in the details. Others are more methodical. They start with one specific detail, such as Tara's wisdom eyes, and practice visualizing that part of the picture until it is clear and stable. Then they add another piece and build up Tara's image slowly, one detail at a time. Use whatever method works best for you.

RECITING THE SEVEN LIMBS PRAYER

A prayer that is often part of the Tibetan Buddhist practice, including the Prayer to the Noble Tara, is called the Seven Limbs. Each of these seven lines (or limbs) of this beautiful verse gives you the opportunity to engage in a brief analytical meditation.

1 – *I bow down in body, speech and mind*

Though the notion of "bowing down" is unfamiliar to Westerners, in Eastern culture, bowing when you meet someone is simply good manners. However, bowing here carries an

additional message. When you say these words to Tara, you are thinking, “I see your qualities and hope to develop them within myself.”

2 – I offer the best I have to give, both real and imagined, to fill the space between us

With these words, you focus on offering gifts and multiplying them in your mind until they fill all space. Visualizing giving abundantly expresses gratitude, develops generosity of spirit and counteracts any tendency you may have to hold back out of fear that your own needs will not be met.

3 – I regret and purify all transgressions

This is a moment when you perform a bit of inner housecleaning. First, you *Review* your past, and recognize any unskillful or hurtful activities that you have done. Naturally, this causes some *regret*, so instead of getting stuck in guilt or some other negative identification, we regard the positive energy of engaging in meditation as a *remedy* for those actions and then with great determination, *resolve* to do better in the future. These are known as the Four Powers, and you can use them whenever you wish to work with the energies that are harmful to self and others.

4 - I rejoice in all virtues

Here you recall all the wonderful things done by Tara and the other spiritual beings you honor, as well as the positive and helpful actions of anyone and everyone. Rejoicing in the good deeds of others counteracts jealousy and competition with delight and appreciation.

5 - I request you to remain until total enlightenment

Here you are asking Tara to be available to help, support, and heal you, from now until you reach your ultimate spiritual goal.

6 – I request wise and compassionate guidance

Bring to mind the spiritual teachers you admire and ask them to give you good counsel. Also express the wish you are able to understand their advice and put it to use.

7 – I dedicate my merit for the sake of all beings

Here you remember the motivation for doing this practice – that all beings, without exception and including you, enjoy lives as free as possible from emotional, mental and physical distress.

Tara is very well known for her specialties: healing and protection.

The healing meditation focuses on purifying and strengthening the 5 elements within us : earth, water, fire, air and space by connecting us to these elements in our environment. In bringing them together and purifying them, Tara rejuvenates the elements within us. Reciting

Tara's mantra while visualizing the elements in the form of rainbow colored light rays means we are calling on her specifically and being assured that through her wisdom and compassion the healing does take place.

Likewise, the protection meditation creates protective light shields around you that emanate from Tara, while engaging in her mantra recitation.

There are guided meditations that you can follow after watching this video explanation. Just close your eyes and listen and follow along.

Tara is very special and easy to work with. She is ready and willing at any time to assist you when you call on her. The more you develop the capacity to open and receive her love and compassion, the quicker and more profound the results of your meditation will be.