

Tara Mandala

A Journey Through Arya Tara's Many Forms

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Hello, I'm Dorje Lupon Chandra Easton and I'm a dharma teacher, author and translator of Tibetan Buddhist texts. I've been teaching dharma and Hatha yoga since 2001. While my studies and practice are founded in the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions as well as Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, my focus is on bringing these beautiful ancient wisdom traditions into the modern age to make them more accessible for modern practitioners.

I serve as the Vajra teacher for Tara Mandala in Southwest Colorado, founded by Lama Tsultrim Allione. And I co-founded a music project called the Twenty-One Taras Collective, where my colleagues Nina Rao and Genevieve Walker and I have composed melodies to the twenty-one Tara mantras that are found in my book called *Embodying Tara: Twenty-One Manifestations to Awaken Your Innate Wisdom*.

I'll be leading this dharma talk called *A Journey Through Arya Tara's Many Forms*. This topic is important to me because through Tara and her many different manifestations—some are peaceful, some are fierce, some are semi-fierce—we can find ourselves in her different expressions.

Deity Yoga

By finding ourselves through her, we start to see that we are none other than the enlightened nature of Tara. That Tara represents our true nature of mind. And that is really the whole point of what's called deity yoga, or the practice of reciting the mantra of a deity, visualizing, embodying the deity and manifesting that particular deity's enlightened activities through meditation and through our actions in our life. That is called deity yoga.

Yoga here also means union, yoking or unifying, just like we would find in the Hatha yoga tradition. In this sense, deity isn't referring to a creator god like in monotheism or even like multiple gods like in polytheistic traditions like Hinduism or other traditions.

Deity or *lha* in Tibetan means an expression or a manifestation of divine energy from the ground of being that manifests as wisdom, manifests as compassion, or manifests as ferocity to help us move through our blockages and our ignorance and come home to our true nature and manifest our own wisdom in our life.

And so when we practice deity yoga with Tara in her different forms, we are in a sense walking back home through her wisdom, through her teaching, through embodying her. And we'll get to do that in our meditation in a moment.

We'll also learn about how Tara woke up from her own ignorance and became a Buddha in her own right.

Tara's story helps us wake up to the slumber of our own ignorance and find our own true nature within that. And understanding Tara's facets helps us understand our own facets and how we can embody her in our world, in our life, and also see how others embody her particular enlightened activity.

So now let's meditate together. But before we meditate, I want to teach you a mantra that we'll do. We will do Tara's main ten syllable mantra. You may already know it, but some people may not. The mantra goes: *Om tare tuttare ture svaha*.

It means Oh Tara, powerful Tara, Oh swift one, so be it. So in a sense, we're calling to her.

Mantra Japa

Mantras are like sacred formulas that help us link into the particular energy of any given deity. This mantra is helping us tune into her wavelength and call to her and ask for her blessings.

We will recite her mantra in a form called mantra japa, which means uttering the mantra in a more monotone way. So let's begin by allowing the eyes to close and taking some deep breaths.

Releasing any tension in the body with the exhalation. Making sure you're comfortable, relaxed. And feel a quality of spaciousness grow within you with each breath.

Now in a very intuitive way, open yourself to Tara as the divine principle of the great mother, of warmth, like the sunlight upon your skin.

She is the embodiment of compassion of all the Buddhas, all wisdom beings throughout all three times of past, present and future. Just feel her blessings descending upon you like the warm sunlight touching your skin.

And as we recite her mantra, feel her blessings descend upon you and all sentient beings everywhere, filling all of space.

Om tare tuttare ture svaha

Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha

Reciting at your own pace, like the buzzing of the bees, feel the vibration of the mantra resonating throughout your whole body.

Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha

It's said to recite just loud enough so that your collarbones can hear you.

Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha

Feel free to sway back and forth, side to side. Tara is swift like the wind so feel her energy like the wind flowing within you.

Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha
Om tare tuttare ture svaha

And feel her light explode into a blissful luminous light and her light then dissolves into you permeating every cell of your body. Feel yourself integrated with the energy of Tara's luminous, loving light.

Thank you.

Arya Tara

Tara is commonly known as Arya Tara. Arya means noble, but it's not an aristocratic meaning in this sense. Buddha Shakyamuni actually took the word noble and reinterpreted it for his students.

What he said was that to truly be noble is to be kind, to be honest, to be compassionate. So that is why he called his first teachings, the four noble truths. It's for people who have that inner sense of nobility, of kindness, of care, of altruism, and likewise the eightfold noble path has the same meaning.

So when we say Arya, which means noble, we mean that: the kind, loving, compassionate mother Tara. She's also known as the savior because her name Tara, literally means she who helps to bring to the other shore, or she who helps to traverse the ocean of samsara, the ocean of suffering. So Tara is the savior, a protectress, but she's also the one who helps us move through the challenges and the dark night of the soul, towards the light, towards the other shore, which is nirvana.

She is primarily known for saving sentient beings from fear and misfortune. She's also known for being swift like the wind as a way of fulfilling her Bodhisattva vow to be available to help beings in need who call to her. What's interesting is that her name also means star. So in that sense, she is like the North Star who helps us traverse our own ocean, our maritime navigation through our life to not lose our direction, not lose hope in our search for freedom and healing.

The Origin Story for Tara

One of my favorite origin stories for Tara is a story that says that she was a princess in a distant aeon, a world system long, long, long ago, many big bangs ago. As a princess, her name was Princess Wisdom Moon or Jnanacandra. She was a Dharma practitioner and she lived in a time where there was a Buddha named the Drum Sound Buddha, Dundubhisvara Buddha.

As a Dharma practitioner she came to a point in her life where she wanted to take what's called the Bodhisattva vow, which is a vow to awaken not just for oneself, but for the benefit of all beings. So she went to the monastery and went to the head abbot of this monastery. And she said, "I would like to take the Bodhisattva vow."

And he rejoiced in her aspiration, but he said, "First, why don't you make the aspiration to be reborn as a man in your next life so that as a man you can benefit more beings?" This was a common belief at that time. She was very dismayed by this ignorant statement.

In response she said, "Here there is no man, there is no woman, there is no I, there is no self, no consciousness. Notions of male and female have no essence, but deceive the evil-minded in this world."

Then she made this vow. She said, “There are many who desire enlightenment in a man's body, but none who seek enlightenment in a woman's body. Therefore, until samsara is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman's body.”

Dundubhisvara Buddha overheard this and rejoiced in this vow. And then he gave her the Bodhisattva vow. She put the teachings into practice and she became a Bodhisattva, and then she became a fully enlightened Buddha. And Dundubhisvara gave her the name Tara. That is the way she gained the name Tara the Savioreess.

And it said that to this day she abides in the samadhi, the meditative concentration called “Continuously Saving All Beings.”

So in this way the teachings say that if you turn towards Tara you will receive her blessings. So now let's turn towards looking at particular Taras.

Historically, evidence of Tara can be found in India around the sixth and seventh century. And she traveled to Tibet around that time with Princess Brikuti, who married the first Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo. Then later, the great teacher Atisa brought reverence and teachings devoted to Tara to Tibet around the 12th century CE.

And he particularly brought teachings on the white and green Tara. And then later, this tantra called the Twenty-One Praises to Tara emerged in the eleventh century as well by the great sage Surya Gupta who lived in Kashmir. That tantra devoted to the twenty-one divine expressions of Tara was translated into Tibetan and brought to Tibet in the 13th century.

The Twenty-One Taras

It's this system of the twenty-one Taras upon which I will share three of the twenty-one Taras. Each Tara represents the different moods or different personalities or dispositions of various deities. The first is peaceful, the second is fierce or wrathful, and the third is semi-fierce and semi-peaceful, sometimes referred to as joyful.

And these moods of deities, we find them in the twenty-one Taras, we find them in different systems with different deities as well. These different moods help to heal and transform what are called the three poisons. This is a teaching that's very common within all the different schools of Buddhism. The three poisons are ignorance, aversion, and clinging.

In this way, peaceful deities can be meditated upon as a way to heal the core poison, ignorance, the first one. Fierce deities can be meditated upon as a way to transmute, to heal the poison of aversion or anger, hatred. And then lastly, semi-fierce, semi-peaceful deities can be employed to

pacify, to heal, to transmute the last of the three poisons of clinging or craving, grasping, sometimes desire is referred to in that last category.

I want to introduce three of these twenty-one Taras that could be meditated upon in that structure. So say for example, somebody has a particular orientation towards anger as their core delusion. A teacher might say, “why don't you practice a fierce deity?” You could meditate on Vajra Kaliya or Vajrapani or one of the fierce Taras. Today I'll share the thirteenth Tara in that context.

Or if somebody is more prone towards desire, craving, grasping, then their teacher might say, “why don't you practice a semi-fierce Tara?” Today I'll introduce the first Tara who's semi-fierce as a way to work with that energy.

Lastly, if somebody is predominantly working with the poison of ignorance, delusion, confusion—and ignorance really in this context refers to ignorance of our true nature, our true way of being—one would be instructed to practice a peaceful deity like Avalokitesvara or Tara in her many forms. Today I will teach you the twenty-first Tara for that purpose.

The First Tara

So let's dive into the first Tara. We'll go in chronological order in that way. The first Tara, her name is Tara Turavira, the Swift Heroine, or in Tibetan, Drolma Nyurma Pamo. Nyurma means Swift, Pamo means Heroine or Goddess.

It's interesting because this first Tara is semi-fierce. She opens the portal or doorway into the practice of the twenty-one Taras with a bit of fire, with a bit of ferocity, but also balanced with peacefulness.

She's red in color. She has a semi-fierce disposition and that means she looks like a *dakini* in the sense that she's showing her fangs, she has a bit of a smile, her eyes are flashing like lightning and she witnesses the suffering of all beings with these eyes wide open.

Her enlightened activity is to increase bodhichitta or the compassionate heart or spirit of awakening within the hearts of all beings, and she also removes obstacles to liberation. We can pray to this Tara not only to help overcome our craving and attachment, like I mentioned can be done with this semi-fierce category of deities, but we can also pray to and embody this Tara Turavira in order to increase bodhichitta within our heart and to overcome obstacles on our path.

Her mantra is: *Om tare tuttara ture bodhichitta svaha.*

Bodhichitta means the spirit of awakening, this compassionate wish to awaken for the benefit of all beings. Her mantra has the ten syllable classic mantra, but then we place that word bodhichitta before svaha.

Om tare tuttare ture bodhichitta svaha.

So you could recite her mantra, imagine her red form appearing in front of you. You could also imagine yourself as Tara while you recite the mantra and really meditate on her meaning so that you can feel the embodiment of her energy within you.

The Thirteenth Tara

Now we'll fast forward to the thirteenth Tara, who is very fierce. Her name is Tara Ripu Chakra Vinashini. I also like to shorten her name to Tara Vinashini. Vinashini means to demolish, to overcome, to overwhelm even. And so my nickname for her is Demolition Tara.

Ripu Chakra also means the ring of enemies. She demolishes the ring of enemies. What that means is that she helps to pacify any negativity that comes into us from the outside. So that can be literal enemies, literal war, aggression, violence, abuse that comes into us from the outside. But it can also mean that she helps to protect us from our own inner demons, our own inner challenges.

Our obstructive emotions like anger, fear, attachment, aversion, ignorance, jealousy, pride, as well as ignorance about the way we truly exist, and that ignorance is what really blocks our experience of freedom in our life, meaning clinging to solidly existing selfhood, which is the Buddha's core teaching around how we suffer. We cling onto a sense of small self.

We don't understand our true mode of abiding, which is free of all of that. We have buddhanature inside of ourselves. This Tara helps us to pacify or demolish, *vinashini*, those tendencies within ourselves. She is very fierce and she is said to manifest in a tent of rainbow light.

We visualize that rainbow light as double Vajras, like little tiny Vajras unified in a net around us or around beings in need of protection.

Tara Vinashini is dark red in color, which shows her very strong, fierce nature. She is said to be dancing, and sometimes seated as well, in a ring of wisdom flames, the kind of flames that burn at the end of an aeon. She's not afraid of that kind of heat. And in fact, she channels it for awakening and for good.

Her mantra is: *Om tare tuttare ture vajra jvala phat phat raksha raksha svaha.*

Now I know that's long, but we will provide the written version of it for you so you can see it written.

Om tare tuttare ture vajra jvala phat phat raksha raksha svaha.

Vajra means adamant scepter. It can also mean lightning bolt, thunderbolt, the indestructible nature of mind is also its deeper meaning.

Jvala means blazing. So vajra jvala means blazing vajras. So that's the rainbow tent that I mentioned of double vajras. And then *phat phat* is a seed syllable that means to cut through delusion, cut through ignorance. *Raksha raksha* means protection. *Svaha* means so be it.

When you recite her mantra you can imagine her in front of you, or you can imagine yourself as her and you can imagine this double vajra rainbow net like a no-fly zone or a peaceful bubble of protection energy around beings in need including yourself.

The Twenty-First Tara

Lastly, I'd like to share a wonderful, peaceful Tara, the twenty-first Tara. Her name is Tara Maricyai or in Tibetan, Drolma Ozer Chenma. This means Tara, Rays of Light. She is white in color, a crystalline white color, like a thousand stars or 100 full autumn moons.

Her enlightened activity is to bestow longevity. She is known as the longevity Tara. She also bestows longevity of culture, longevity of wisdom streams, longevity of all that is good and should be remembered. What's interesting is this Tara also protects beings who are in between one place and another, like refugees, immigrants, people who are traveling.

People who are moving through the bardo, so to speak, the intermediate stage between one life and the next. What I love about this Tara is she also protects animals. So if you are an animal rights activist, she is your Tara. So she has a lot of different important powers and benefits.

Her mantra is similar to the other mantras in that they use the framework of the ten syllable mantra of Tara, but we put a few words in between svaha.

Her mantra is: *Om tare tuttare ture maricyai che bhrum nrja svaha.*

Maricyai is her name, in the declension that means *O Tara* or *to Tara* I pray. *Che* is like an echo. *Bhrum* is her seed syllable, and it's a seed syllable for all the longevity deities like Amitayus and also Ushnishavijaya Tara. Those are three of the main longevity deities. White Tara Marichi, Tara Ushnishavijaya, who is actually the fourth Tara in this twenty-first Tara pantheon, and then the male Buddha Amitayus.

So *bhrum*, B-H-R-U-M, is a seed syllable which literally means seed or embryo, that which gives life, therefore the longevity deity seed syllable. *Nrja* means born from a lotus. *Svaha* means so be it.

Om tare tuttare ture maricyai che bhrum nrja svaha.

You can recite her mantra, again, imagining her in the space in front of you, bestowing longevity and blessings to all beings, including yourself. You can also feel what it's like to embody her form and recite the mantra and imagine that you are bestowing these wonderful gifts to all beings everywhere.

The Various Taras

The way that the first Tara Turavira ties in with the work and healing of craving, desire, attachment, is that we learn to discern what we want to do, what we don't want to do, instead of attaching onto various things and also being more discerning with our thoughts and how we grasp or cling onto various aspects of our identity or ways of thinking about ourself in the world.

By increasing our understanding and sense of bodhichitta, because remember that's her particular power, we can heal and understand with more loving kindness and compassion the ways that we might cling out of a feeling of lack or needing to fill certain holes or spaces that we might feel in our life and begin to heal those and understand ourselves more clearly.

The way that we can heal the poison of anger through the fierce Tara Vinashini is to understand that behind anger and aggression is a very strong lightning bolt of power. If you remember the last time you felt angry, you may recall that underneath the kind of the confusion or the fog of anger was some clarity. There was something that needed to be said or someone or something that needed to be defended.

We touch into that clarity and that ferocity of clarity that deities like Tara Vinashini embody as they say, “No, enough is enough. The ring of enemies is not going to get in here. I have boundaries. I have a sense of truth and honesty and integrity. I won't let—whether it's the inner challenges or the outer challenges—come in and alter that or hurt me in that way.”

We channel, whether it's anger that we perceive from the outside—but really what we're talking about more here is our own feeling of anger or aggression. We can transmute that and feel it as fierce strength that knows right from wrong. That can see things with a mirror-like wisdom.

Then finally, transmuting ignorance, delusion, confusion, a sense of maybe disassociation or disillusionment with the world, this final poison of ignorance with peaceful deities [like Tara

Marichi] is very interesting because one way of describing ignorance or delusion is a checking out or dissociation, a dullness or a not knowingness.

Through peaceful deities, we heighten our sense of wisdom and clarity in a relaxed, open, spacious way, and also feel a sense of healing. In this case, with this particular Tara, a longevity of our wisdom nature shining through and healing the aspects of ourselves that are clouded over, that mute or dull that wisdom nature. Remembering that our own buddhanature itself is always shining, is always perfect just as it is.

It's just adventitious circumstances, karmic patterns that cause a cloudy delusion or ignorance of it. Peaceful deities are a lot about purifying; purifying those delusions that keep us separate from our true nature and in that way bring about the longevity that comes from a more wholesome, purified perception of our true nature and our existence in this world.

So I hope that you feel inspired to embody Tara in her many different forms, to learn more about her, to bring her enlightened activities into your life, into your being, into your world. And I hope that in beautiful and mysterious ways, Tara lives within you and in your life and she blesses you on your path.

Thank you.