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**Formal Spiritual Representations in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism
in the Context of Traditional Sacred Art**

Formal Spiritual Representations in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in the Context of Traditional Sacred Art

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Abstract

The talk will address the role of sacred art in spiritual traditions, with a particular focus on Indo-Tibetan *vajrayana* art.

Traditional sacred art serves as a **sensory support for spiritual practice**: through the visible forms of the contingent world, the contemplator ascends toward invisible and eternal realities. In *vajrayana* Buddhism, this process takes on a distinctive character – the aim is the transformation of the human being into a *buddha* – and sacred images (*buddhas*, *bodhisattvas*, deities) are iconograms, that is, complex systems of symbolism that guide the meditator through progressive stages of awareness, up to transcending the very need for material support.

A central instrument of this tradition is the **mandala**, a geometric-architectural diagram representing the relationship between the universe and the human mind, modelled on the image of the Universal Monarch's palace on the cosmic mountain. The visual language of *vajrayana* art is articulated through simultaneous codes – spatial, chromatic, sonic, theurgic – all converging toward a single liturgical and initiatory purpose: to nourish the "seed of the *buddha*" present in every sentient being and to accelerate its awakening.

Unlike Christianity and the other Abrahamic religions, where an ontological gulf between creator and creature remains, Buddhism proposes a complete identification of the practitioner with the deity, through meditative visualization and "divine pride": ordinary appearances are not denied, but progressively replaced by divine ones.

In summary, the method employed here can be defined as a **pedagogy of perception by degrees**: one begins with the concrete visible, uses it symbolically, internalizes it, and finally transcends it. Art is never an end in itself, but a provisional and functional instrument for the transformation of consciousness.

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«*Quid interest qua quisque prudentia verum requirat?*
Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum.»
Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, *Relatio tertia de repetenda ara Victoriae* – X
(‘What does it matter through which form of wisdom each person seeks the truth?
One cannot arrive at so great a mystery by a single path.’)

Formal representations in traditional sacred art serve one purpose alone: to function as a sensory support for spiritual practice. This concise definition – bordering on oxymoron – holds for all traditionally conceived sacred arts, including Christian art, although nowadays, to find a direct parallel, we would need to look not to the Latin West but to the Christian East. The icon in the Christian East fulfils a role in some ways analogous to that of sacred images in India and Tibet, but with a fundamental difference: whereas the Christian does not practise their religion in order to *become* the Holy Trinity – given the ontological gulf between creator and creature – the Buddhist practises their path precisely in order to become a *buddha*. Sacred art thus becomes a kind of external reminder, a kind of sketch that is only instrumentally represented outside the minds of contemplatives, but which is in reality nothing other than a synthetic and simplified reference to highly complex operations that can occur within the plastic imagination – the power of imagination – of the contemplator, with the aim of accelerating their process of transformation from an ordinary human being into a perfectly accomplished awakened one (*buddha*).

Those spiritual paths that have accepted the challenge of attempting to render the invisible in visible form (Pope Leo the Great described holy icons as *visibilia invisibilium*, "visible forms of the invisible") – setting aside, for example, Judaism and Islam – adopt formal criteria for the expression of the sacred by virtue of the 'analogy of attribution': that is, not by denying the forms of the contingent and transient world, but on the contrary by using them as a kind of launching pad to ascend from visible and temporal forms to invisible and eternal ones. This attitude stands as the interpretive key for all traditionally conceived sacred arts.

In this, Buddhism brings its own specific character. The anthropomorphic images of *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* are in fact iconograms – aggregates of powerful symbolisms organised according to schemas prescribed by canonical literature. Though appearing in human form, the bodies of *buddhas* are themselves symbols, serving both as a source of moral inspiration and as a support for contemplation. The art of Indo-Tibetan *vajrayana* (the 'vehicle of the adamantine thunderbolt') – the esoteric, liturgical and initiatory aspect of *mahayana* Buddhism – therefore assumes a ritual significance, expressing itself as a liturgy of the transfiguration of the human into the divine.

The wondrous beings depicted in this art, endowed as they are with a form free to express itself across a boundless field of action, provoke profound transformations in the consciousness of those who approach them. Indeed, since the latent energies stimulated by *vajrayana* practices are considered extremely powerful, the formal meditations connected with the deities are accessible only to qualified and responsible students under the protective guidance of a master.

The artistic representations of *vajrayana* deities, existing in order to make contact with ordinary awareness, accommodate this human mode of perception by presenting themselves as multiple to their many interlocutors. A language articulated in such a way has, among other aims, the purpose of leading an

ordinary individual to consider ever less obvious categories of phenomenal reality, compelling the perception of what one normally refuses to see. Gradually the devotee progresses through various levels of awareness, at the end of which they transcend the need for any sensory material support.

Indo-Tibetan sacred art expresses, in essence, the attempt to impress upon an image a vigorous mystical power, evoked by a meditator so that it may be effectively transmitted – with as few variations as possible – to another meditator, by means of complex symbolisms, iconogrammetric structures and iconological codes. The 'seed of the *buddha*' (*tathagatagarbha*) present in the mental continuum of every sentient being is nourished by the process of visualising and contemplating these mystical diagrams.

For the purposes of liturgical and initiatory practice, it is necessary to have a clear awareness of oneself as a deity and to adopt the corresponding 'divine pride' (*devamana*). In this process, ordinary appearances – visible to the eyes of the flesh – are not denied; rather, by preventing ordinary phenomena from appearing to mental awareness, one causes the divine appearances to shine more brightly. When, having interrupted ordinary appearances and developed the clear appearance of oneself as a deity, this spiritual appearance becomes stable, the ordinary appearances of the physical and mental aggregates finally cease. It is then that the divine physical and mental aggregates appear to the mind's eye.

In the *vajrayana* tradition, buddhahood and the path toward it can furthermore be described through the geometric formalisation of an architectural layout – the *mandala* – which is proposed as an ideal graphic representation of the relationships between the universe and the human mind. The *mandala* can also be defined as the world of being, presided over by truth; the *bhavachakra* (the circular pictography representing the 'wheel of rebirths') is, by contrast, the world of becoming – the *samsara* devoured by oblivion, represented by Yama, the god of the dead in Buddhist cosmology.

The formal, artistic rendering of this entire process occurs by virtue of a sophisticated symbolic language which, for its articulation, employs a series of codes present simultaneously within the same image. There is accordingly a code that makes use of the spatial arrangement of the various figurative elements (whether geometric or not), as well as a chromatic code, a sonic code, and a 'theurgic' code – in the sense that the various deities themselves, depicted with greater or lesser anthropomorphic realism, are in turn terms within a syntactic superstructure whose purpose is to serve as a sensory support for spiritual practice.

The form of the *mandala* can be traced back to the plan of the palace of a Universal Monarch (*chakravartin*), a concept which is itself traceable to the formalisation of the Iranian urban ideal. The palace of the Indian monarch, like that of a Babylonian monarch, echoes the model of the stepped pyramids crowned by a temple. The Universal Monarch must reside there because, as king of the gods, he must dwell upon the summit of the cosmic mountain, symbolising the integration of the political order with the religious, the indissoluble union of heaven and earth: «*quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius*» (Pseudo-Hermes, *Tabula Smaragdina*).

According to the description given in the Pali Canon in the *Dighanikaya*, such a dwelling is surrounded by seven walls made of gold, silver, beryl, crystal, ruby, coral, and various jewels.

This account cannot but call to mind the description of the Heavenly Jerusalem given by John of Patmos in *Revelation* 21:16–20:

"The city is laid out as a square [...] The foundations of the city walls are adorned with every kind of precious stone: the first foundation is jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth

sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst."

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