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**Miranda Shaw: Buddhist Goddesses of India**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist pantheon of India features a fascinating and diverse array of female divinities. The pantheon is dazzling in its breadth, encompassing voluptuous tree spirits, maternal nurturers, exalted wisdom figures, compassionate healers, powerful protectors, cosmic mothers of liberation, and dancing female Buddhas. Goddesses preside over childbirth, agriculture, prosperity, longevity, art, music, learning, love magic, and occult practices. There are goddesses who offer protection from epidemics, snakebite, demons, curses, untimely death, and every mortal danger. There are also goddesses who support practitioners in their pursuit of knowledge, mental purification, a higher rebirth, and full spiritual awakening.

Female deities occupy every echelon of the divine hierarchy, from nature spirits embedded in the landscape to cosmic figures representing the highest truths and attainments of the tradition. Various beatific and wrathful, tender and fearsome, serene and ecstatic, they represent the energies, powers, and beings that surround and suffuse human life. They also reflect the inner depths of the human spirit, embodying qualities that may be awakened through spiritual practice. Thus, they are envisioned at once as supernal beings who minister to those enmeshed in worldly existence, as potent forces that may be invoked through ritual and meditation, and as models of human aspiration.

For these female divinities, I use the term “goddess.” These goddesses are not marginal to Buddhist thought and practice but play an integral and often prominent role in their varied religious settings. Despite their tremendous importance in living Buddhism and pervasive presence in Buddhist texts and art, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the female deities of the tradition. The last decade has, however, witnessed a dramatic upsurge of interest in the topic and the appearance of numerous substantive articles and several major monographs. This rapidly expanding field of inquiry makes evident the need for a comprehensive survey of the Buddhist goddesses of India that documents the forms, attributes, and roles of the main divinities and traces the historical development of the pantheon.

Although Buddhist goddesses regularly find mention in publications spanning the last century, their treatment has been concentrated in works on Indian and Buddhist art. These include art historical surveys and catalogs of museum collections and exhibitions. Such writings are primarily concerned with issues of iconography, provenance, and style rather than religious meaning and history. Therefore, although Buddhist goddesses appear frequently in print, one finds the same core of basic information with little advance in interpretation. Moreover, because female deities have long been of marginal interest to the field of Buddhist studies at large, knowledge of the female pantheon has not kept pace or been integrated with other advances in scholarship. The information presently available about most of these goddesses is limited to brief iconographic descriptions and thumbnail sketches of their religious meaning.

The present volume provides a fuller portrait of the individual divinities and identifies broader thematic and historical trends in the pantheon. I present a comprehensive overview of each goddess, including the dates of her emergence in literary and artistic sources, her iconographic evolution and range of epiphanies, the types of practices in which she figures, and original and evolving ideas of her nature and religious roles. The historical development of each figure unfolds not simply on a Buddhist stage but also against the backdrop of Indic culture at large. In many cases I identify deities, mythic themes, and symbolic motifs from the surrounding cultural landscape that influenced the character of a given goddess. This aspect of my study brings a new perspective to attributes that might otherwise seem to be Buddhist innovations, revealing the degree to which the pantheon is rooted in broader Indic cosmological, mythological, and symbolic patterns.

This study primarily features the major goddesses that appear in Indian Buddhist literature, visual arts, and practice traditions. In addition, several chapters are devoted to a class of divinity, a significant text, or human figures relevant to the goddess theme. Minor deities that serve only as attendants or mandala retinue figures are not included.<sup>1</sup> In historical scope, the volume covers Indian Buddhism in its entirety, from the earliest traceable origins to the twelfth century C.E., documenting the female pantheon as it evolved through the early, Mahayana, and Tantric movements.<sup>2</sup> The deities introduced in India constituted the core pantheon that was adopted, modified, and expanded as Buddhism spread throughout Asia. This volume also addresses the transmission of these goddesses to Tibet and Nepal, charting continuities and changes in their iconography and practice in the different cultural spheres and examining their ongoing roles in contemporary settings.

One reason for covering such a vast array of divinities is the vantage point this affords for identifying broad regional and historical trends. As later goddesses

inherit traits from, expand on, and replace earlier ones, a sequential pattern emerges, making it possible to locate each figure within the developmental trajectory of the pantheon. Furthermore, this study provides a vital perspective on the Buddhist tradition as a whole, for the pantheon reflects changes in theory and soteriology and deepens our understanding of Buddhist devotional and ritual life.

My research is based largely on primary textual and artistic sources. I have consulted a wide range of literary genres, such as meditation manuals, devotional poetry, chanted liturgies, ritual texts, scriptures, and biographies. Many of the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Newar writings that I use have not previously been translated. For these, I have relied on and present here my own translations. These sources are drawn from such compendia as the *Sādhanamālā*, Derge edition of the Tibetan canon, Sakya *sGrub thabs kun btus* and *rGyud sde kun btus*, and Newar anthologies of hymns and ritual songs, as well as Tibetan visualization manuals and liturgies in current usage.

Archaeological remains and artistic images are also central to my analyses and constitute primary documents equal in value to literary works. Indeed, the visual record significantly complements and supplements the evidence provided by written texts. Because so many works of art are inscribed or datable on stylistic grounds, they often provide more specific evidence of the historical origins and evolution of the goddesses than do the literary sources. When works of art survive from regions or periods that are not well attested in textual sources, the material record provides crucial evidence for establishing the geographic and temporal compass of a particular goddess. Thus, images are invaluable for documenting the evolution of specific divinities and the pantheon as a whole.

Iconographic analysis plays an important part in my interpretations. Traits such as body color, stance, hairstyle, clothing, jewelry, hand gestures, and hand-held objects help communicate the religious import and roles of each goddess. Moreover, artistic treatments of a given figure may include iconographic features that do not appear in written descriptions, providing an eloquent “visual text” of her qualities and character. In many cases, iconographic motifs shared with figures other than Buddhist goddesses help reconstruct the influences—within Buddhism and beyond—that shaped the evolution of a divinity. I also address iconographic preferences and innovations that emerged when a deity migrated from India to Tibet or Nepal.

I conducted extensive field research in preparation for this volume, making four trips to India and Nepal between 1995 and 2000. My research in India was primarily historical. I searched photographic archives, libraries, and museums for publications and works of art relevant to my study and consulted Indian scholars and Sanskritists. In Nepal, I conducted research in Tibetan and Newar

Buddhist communities in order to explore the goddesses' roles in contemporary settings. I visited Tibetan and Newar temples and manuscript collections and interviewed Newar priests and scholars and Tibetan masters representing different lineages within the Kagyu, Sakya, Gelug, and Nyingma schools. My time in the field also afforded opportunities to examine works of art in context and to observe rituals, dances, processions, and initiations. These investigations yielded significant historical insights and enhanced my understanding of the roles of the goddesses in the living tradition.

While consulting secondary sources, I regularly encountered errors regarding the identification, iconographic manifestations, and attributes of a given deity. Many of these inaccuracies are traceable to the exploratory efforts of pioneering scholars and have simply been repeated over the decades without reassessment. I directly address such misconceptions when they have a strong bearing on identification or interpretation. In other instances, I simply refer in passing to a common error or misidentification. However, because such mistakes are so numerous and pervasive I have not found it feasible to mention and cite them in every case. To do so would unduly lengthen my study without enhancing its usefulness. Therefore, I offer my references to primary sources in the stead of detailed explanations of discrepancies with information published elsewhere.

This volume is designed to serve a broad range of scholars and educators as a reference, research, and instructional tool. Therefore, each chapter is written as a complete unit that may be read independently as a source of reference on a given goddess. Each chapter opens with a brief portrait of the goddess. The content and organization of the chapters are then shaped by the types of evidence that emerged and the interpretive issues they raised. In some instances, a mythic narrative warrants close attention; in others, questions of historical origins, iconographic analysis, artistic treatments, or distinctive practice traditions come to the fore. Regardless of the differing emphases, readers may expect to find attention to the origins, iconography, and religious roles of each goddess and discussion of her place in Buddhist history and practice.

One of my aims in this work is to redress the unidimensional way in which Buddhist goddesses are customarily described in western scholarship. It is common practice simply to define a given deity by a philosophical concept that he or she represents or a benefaction that he or she confers. This formulaic approach conveys the impression that the deities are abstract entities interchangeable with or reducible to doctrinal categories or functions. I have found, however, that the divinities are typically envisioned as dynamic and complex entities with intricately drawn personae, powers, and numinous qualities. Thus, I have tried to provide fuller and more multifaceted portraits of "who" the goddesses are. This approach accords with their treatment in Buddhist sources, in which the goddesses emerge

as living presences with multiple divine bodies, glorious environments, and attributes that proclaim their fabulous powers and spheres of mastery.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The book is divided into three sections, documenting the female pantheon as it evolved through the early, Mahayana, and Tantric periods.<sup>3</sup> The most ancient phases of Buddhism are not preserved in the historical record. Not until around the third century B.C.E. is early Buddhism evinced in archaeological sources. The same century saw the beginning of a textual canonization process, although the early literary productions survive in later recensions. The Mahayana movement gained momentum in the first and second centuries C.E. and remained on the forefront of intellectual innovation and an expanding practice repertoire until the seventh century, when Tantric elements came to the fore and were forged into a significantly new pattern of theory and practice. The metaphysics and soteriology of each movement are reflected in the deities it advanced and the status and roles accorded to those deities. I place each goddess in the section that covers the movement, or period, during which she was introduced and her central features defined, although I address her survival in later periods and any alterations to her character that occurred.

Part One, titled “Ascent of the Sacred Female in Early Buddhism,” chronicles the goddesses who appear in the earliest sources and iconographic programs. A variety of supernatural beings participated in the career of Shakyamuni Buddha and offered various forms of assistance to his followers. Among them are several female figures and figural types that are drawn directly from Indic cosmology and receive little elaboration beyond their incorporation into Buddhist narratives and works of art. Thus, we find Pṛthivī, mother earth, an important figure in Vedic religiosity, playing a pivotal role in the enlightenment of Shakyamuni, defending him against the assault of the demon king Māra and granting him the throne of earthly sovereignty. Another figure of Vedic origin, Śrī Lakṣmī, the goddess of abundance and good fortune, also found an honored place in early Buddhist worship and iconography. The ancient cult of female nature spirits and local guardians known as *yakṣiṇīs* flourished and found unparalleled artistic expression in Buddhist settings. Hārītī rose from the ranks of the *yakṣiṇīs* to become the *yakṣiṇī* queen and the focus of a distinctively Buddhist cultus, with an elaborate mythology and shrines in monasteries across the Buddhist world.

Two human figures are also featured in this section. Māyādevī, the mother of Shakyamuni Buddha, is included as an exalted female whose character has supernatural aspects. The section concludes with an examination of Gotamī,

the foster mother of Shakyamuni and founder of the female monastic order, whose career and attainment of enlightenment provides the nascent concept of female Buddhahood.

Goddesses receive substantial attention in Mahayana literature, practice, and iconography. This emphasis is already evident in the earliest Mahayana writings, dating to the first and second centuries C.E. Part Two, “Mahayana Mothers of Liberation,” opens with a chapter on one such opus, the *Flower Ornament Scripture*, whose narrative of the pilgrim Sudhana reveals the expanded role of female divinities in Mahayana soteriology. Another foundational work, the *8000-Line Perfect Wisdom Scripture*, introduces Prajñāpāramitā, the first cosmic female of the Buddhist pantheon, whose embodiment of transcendent wisdom becomes a hallmark of the conception of female divinity.

Whereas the earlier pantheon was drawn largely from preexisting figures and figural types, the Mahayana movement engendered the rise of female saviors and protectors that embody explicitly Buddhist ideals and attainments. Their benefactions, which aid practitioners both materially and spiritually, flow from their Buddhist virtues of wisdom and compassion. While Mahayana writers and iconographers introduced divinities of recognizably Buddhist provenance, they often drew attributes from earlier figures and Hindu deities, adding their own distinctive stamp through an innovative combination of classical iconographic elements, a Buddhist origin myth, and salvific activities of a decidedly Buddhist cast.

The Mahayana pantheon features several powerful protectors, such as Mārīcī, goddess of the dawn; Sitāpatrā, guardian against supernatural dangers; and Jāṅgulī, protectress against harm by snakes and poison. A range of divinities address specific areas of human need. The most important among them are Parṇasavarī, a healing deity; Vasudhārā, bestower of wealth and abundance; Sarasvatī, patroness of learning and the arts; Uṣṇīṣavijayā, who confers long life and a fortunate rebirth; and Cundā, who inspires and supports spiritual practice. Tārā, the subject of the last chapter in this section, is the most beloved goddess of the Mahayana pantheon and a savior of unlimited powers. She is the focus of an immense theological enterprise proclaiming her metaphysical supremacy and, uniquely among the Mahayana cohort, her Buddhahood.

In Mahayana writings, these female divinities are routinely accorded the same titles they have in the Hindu setting, namely, *devī* and *devatā*, synonymous terms that mean “goddess.” Interestingly, they are rarely described as bodhisattvas, the term customarily applied to analogous male figures, such as Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī. The female figures display the defining bodhisattva attributes of wisdom, compassion, and commitment to the liberation of all living beings. Instead of “bodhisattva,” however, the female divinities

are customarily designated by the grammatically feminine terms *dhāraṇī* and *vidyā*.

*Dhāraṇī*, a noun derived from the verbal root *dhṛ*, meaning “to carry” or “to bear,” refers to mantras, the sounds that “carry” the essence, or energy, of a deity. The intonation of the *dhāraṇī* makes contact with the goddess on her plane of reality, invoking her presence and activating her liberating functions. The term *dhāraṇī* is used to refer to the mantras that invoke female deities as well as the deities themselves.<sup>4</sup> The origin story of Uṣṇīṣavijayā underscores her character as a *dhāraṇī* goddess by describing her materialization from the light rays with which Shakyamuni Buddha etched her *dhāraṇī* in the sky. In other accounts, the introduction of a goddess is concurrent with the revelation of her *dhāraṇī* and its powers.

One less often encounters the term *vidyā*, a feminine noun derived from the verbal root *vid*, “to know.” *Vidyā*, too, is synonymous with “mantra,” although *vidyā* typically refers to the mantric invocation of a female deity. When used with reference to a deity, *vidyā*, translatable as “incantation lady,” designates a female who wields knowledge of magical rites and lore. As in the case of *dhāraṇī*, the term *vidyā* is used to refer both to the deity and to her mantric invocation. A variation on the term, *mahāvīdyārājīnī*, “great queen of incantations,” is used most often with reference to Sitātapatrā but occasionally found in association with other figures.

A *dhāraṇī* deity is a great savior, protector, and liberator. As such, these Mahayana goddesses occupy a distinctive salvational niche. Their status in the pantheon neither presumes nor precludes their attainment of full enlightenment. The Mahayana theological framework conceives spiritually advanced and fully enlightened beings who can adopt numerous guises—male, female, animal, human, divine—in order to minister to diverse beings throughout the universe. The lofty realizations and powers of such advanced beings are virtually beyond human reckoning, and many complexities arise in efforts to typologize the forms and bodies they may assume.<sup>5</sup> Significant for the present discussion is that fact that the different forms of embodiment are what receive classification. For example, if a fully enlightened Buddha manifests as a demigod (*asura*) in order to appear among and liberate demigods, that embodiment would be identified as an *asura* rather than a Buddha. Similarly, if a fully enlightened being manifests as a *dhāraṇī* deity, that embodiment is classified as a *dhāraṇī* deity rather than a Buddha. This status is assigned on the basis of the form and purpose of the embodiment rather than the level of attainment of the divinity. The explicit and elected purpose of *dhāraṇī* deities is not to embody full enlightenment but rather to display distinct qualities, exercise particular powers, and confer specific benefactions.

Also important to the understanding and classification of Buddhist divinities is the practices associated with them. The dhāraṇī goddesses do not as a rule figure in practices directly devoted to supreme enlightenment. Rather, their practices devolve upon the invocation of their powers to accomplish a range of practical and magical aims, with an emphasis on immediate efficacy, although the meritorious and purificatory aspects of the practices are understood to create favorable conditions for a positive rebirth and to promote gradual progress toward enlightenment. Deities and practices of this genre began to be introduced as early as the second century C.E. under the Mahayana rubric but were eventually incorporated into the Tantric repertoire. They were largely placed in the categories of Action (Kriyā) Tantra and Discipline (Caryā) Tantra, which entail deity visualization, mantra recitation, and ritual procedures rather than the esoteric yogic practices that lead to Buddhahood.<sup>6</sup>

The final goddess of this section, Tārā, is an exceptional figure with respect to the Mahayana typology. Tārā stands on the cusp of the Mahayana and Tantric traditions because her persona and iconography reflect the Mahayana idiom, while her status as a Buddha—unique in this grouping—brings her into alignment with emerging Tantric themes.

Part Three, “Tantric Female Buddhas,” examines the figures introduced in the fully developed Tantric paradigm. Tantric texts use the term “goddess” (*devī*) with reference to these figures but also introduce new nomenclature, such as *ḍākinī* and *yoginī*. Furthermore, the Tantric goddesses are recognized and explicitly designated as Buddhas, for they embody supreme enlightenment, and the goal of practices dedicated to them is Buddhahood during the present lifetime of the practitioner. These practices fall within the Highest Yoga (Anuttara Yoga) Tantra category and entail the cultivation of transcendent bliss (*mahāsukha*) and realization of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the two qualities whose perfection culminates in Buddhahood.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the iconographic traits of the Tantric goddesses differ markedly from those characteristic of Mahayana goddesses, in accordance with their contrasting roles and status. Whereas the features of the Mahayana figures reflect their powers and benefactions, Tantric iconographic motifs make reference to bliss, emptiness, subtle metaphysical principles, and esoteric yogic and ritual practices.

Each Tantric figure covered in this section embodies supreme Buddhahood. The distinctive personae of the female Buddhas evoke different dimensions of enlightenment. This section opens with Vajrayoginī, the “Adamantine Yogini,” who is inarguably the supreme deity of the Tantric pantheon. No male Buddha, including her divine consort, Heruka-Cakrasaṃvara, approaches her in metaphysical or practical import. In this section we also find Nairātmā, the blue female Buddha, whose persona evokes the spaciousness and selflessness of

enlightened awareness. Chinnamuṇḍā, who waves aloft her own severed head, provides a startling portrait of advanced yogic practices and realizations. Lion-headed Siṃhamukhā offers a primal vision of untamable power. The voluptuous Kurukullā, with her flowered adornments, extends an enticing invitation into the realm of spiritual transformation. The female Buddhas are regarded as ultimately inseparable from one another, for the sphere of nondual awareness they inhabit admits no distinctions.

### WHY “GODDESS”?

The use of the term “goddess” to refer to the female divinities of Buddhism is not a widespread practice in western scholarship on the tradition. One finds instead a preference for “female deity,” “female divinity,” and even “female myth-model.”<sup>8</sup> The lexical meaning of “goddess” is precisely “female deity,” or “female divinity.” Definitional equivalence alone, however, has not been sufficient to establish the term in the scholarly lexicon. Indian scholars have never been hesitant to use “goddess,” but western scholars eschew the term, motivated in large part by a desire to discourage facile comparison of Buddhist divinities with those of other traditions. Debate regarding the appropriateness of “goddess” has recently arisen in the context of studies on Tantric deities. Judith Simmer-Brown holds that use of the term would belie the sophisticated, relativistic ontology underlying Tantric conceptions of deity.<sup>9</sup> Anne Klein has voiced a concern that the feminine resonance of “goddess” may be misleading, insofar as the asserted “femaleness” may be incommensurate with western understandings of gender.<sup>10</sup>

Although it is important to be attentive to distinctive Buddhist perspectives on divinity and gender, the fact remains that Buddhist writings have used the term “goddess” for the female deities of the tradition from the early through the Tantric periods. Thus, we find usage of the Pali term *devatā*, Sanskrit *devatā* and *devī*, and Tibetan *lha-mo*, all meaning “goddess,” alongside more specific designations for different classes of divinities introduced over the centuries.

The meaning of this nomenclature, however, changed in accordance with evolving Buddhist theological views. Early Buddhism shared the cosmology of the broader South Asian populace, which envisioned a universe inhabited by gods (*deva*), goddesses (*devī*, *devatā*), and other supernatural beings. Buddhists recognized the existence of a panoply of divine beings but did not accord them moral or spiritual superiority. Rather, Buddhists simply counted the divine beings among the followers and supporters of the Buddha. In this context, use of the term “goddess” is nonproblematic with reference to the divine females drawn from the preexisting pantheon, such as the earth goddess Pṛthivī, the

goddess Lakṣmī, and the numerous yakṣiṇīs of the Indian landscape. At the same time, early Buddhism cannot accurately be characterized as a theistic tradition, for it centers on and derives its teachings from an enlightened human being rather than a supreme divinity. Therefore, the theological speculations that arose in this context pertained to the person and career of Shakyamuni and other historical Buddhas.

Mahayana Buddhism entered more classically theistic terrain with the introduction of an array of divine beings whose lofty status was attributable to their Buddhist virtues and advancement along the path to Buddhahood. This newly emerging theism, however, took shape alongside the central Mahayana principle of emptiness, which holds that reality is in perpetual flux and there are no independently or permanently real objects or entities. The doctrine of emptiness precludes the attribution of absolute or eternal existence to the many Buddhas, celestial bodhisattvas, and dhāraṇī deities of the Mahayana pantheon.

The Tantric movement retained many of the earlier divinities and introduced a continuously expanding repertoire of deities with multiple attendants and extensive mandala retinues. The doctrine of emptiness remained operative as the underlying principle of the pantheon. The Tantric practice of deity yoga (*deva-yoga*), which culminates in identification and merging with the envisioned deity, further dispels any view of the deities as concrete entities essentially “separate” or “different” from humans.

The emptiness of the deities, like the concept of emptiness itself, is a nuanced metaphysical view that easily lends itself to misinterpretation. This subtle teaching regarding the impermanence and interdependence of all phenomena is commonly mistaken for nihilism, a denial of any existence whatsoever. Thus, some western thinkers conclude that the deities are “unreal” or “nonexistent” in an absolute sense, interpreting their emptiness as nonreality. According to this view, the deities do not exist in any sense, except as human inventions or useful tools for spiritual development.

Seeking to redress this rather crude absolutism, Bokar Rinpoche, a contemporary Tibetan teacher, clarifies the ontological status of the deities. He explains that the deities are not illusions produced by the human mind. However, human envisionments of deities are mental fabrications that do not correspond precisely to the forms of those deities. In that sense, Bokar Rinpoche concedes, a deity can be said to be a creation of the human psyche.<sup>11</sup> This illusory status, however, holds true only of the human concept and image of a deity, not of the deity himself or herself. The deities are realities that transcend this world and “spontaneously assume . . . various forms . . . to benefit beings.”<sup>12</sup> Religious practice, he holds, is an interaction between deity and devotee that invokes the protection, assistance, blessings, and revelation of the deity.<sup>13</sup>

Human envisionments of deity, as in the practice of deity yoga, offer a means to approach the deity and eventually to attain a direct vision of the deity's divine form in all its glory and living reality.<sup>14</sup> When deity and practitioner merge in the culmination of deity yoga, and their identities dissolve into one, it is not because the deity was unreal all along but because the practitioner has entered the radiant, blissful realm of nondual awareness the deity inhabits. Moreover, the practitioner comes to recognize that the qualities of the deity were already present in a dormant state in his or her own being, waiting to be awakened.<sup>15</sup>

Bokar Rinpoche thus clarifies the Buddhist perspective that the deities are not simply the products of human intellect and imagination, although their appearance is molded in accordance with human aesthetic preferences, conceptual categories, and spiritual capacities. Rather, the deities are spiritually advanced and enlightened beings who command an array of supernormal abilities and insights into reality that they employ in order to liberate others. Further, these deities are not merely "symbols" of the qualities they embody, nor are they inventions of human imagination or convenient fictions or tools for human spiritual growth. The powers they grant, protection they offer, and blessings they bestow are tangibly real. The practices associated with them—mantra recitation, ritual, meditation, deity yoga—are regarded as genuinely efficacious and transformative.

Moreover, it is not enough simply to concede that the deities are "just as real as humans," for deities are supernal beings of immense temporal duration whose existence is not subject to the ordinary laws of cause and effect. They will themselves into existence and operate from transcendent planes of bliss and awareness for as long as their presence may benefit living beings. Thus, there is a sense in which the deities are "more real" than humans, for the illusions and suffering that characterize human life are ephemeral phenomena, whereas the wisdom and compassion impelling the deities are irreducible elements of reality.

It was important for early western scholars to distinguish between Buddhism and the forms of theism and monotheism with which they were familiar. However, religious scholarship now recognizes a broad spectrum of views of divinity. Contemporary readers typically have a broader comparative base that includes traditions with ontologically and psychologically nuanced views of deity that are in many respects comparable to those of Buddhism. Many traditions espouse metaphysically subtle understandings of deities as dynamic forces and energies that impinge on human experience in complex ways rather than as "divine persons" narrowly conceived. Moreover, many traditions around the globe recognize the symbolic nature of human conceptions, images, and names for the divine and cast the human-divine relationship in nondual terms. Diverse

traditions—from the shamanic to the mystical—envision the possibility of a merging with deity in which human subjectivity is replaced by divine awareness. In view of our more advanced stage of cross-cultural awareness, I have chosen to adopt the term “goddess” in part to include Buddhism in the ongoing conversation regarding the many forms that theism may take.

I have also opted to use the term “goddess” in order to situate my work within the field of goddess studies, which is emerging as a serious branch of academic inquiry. Scholars have documented significant historical and contemporary goddess traditions throughout the world and developed increasingly sophisticated theoretical approaches to this burgeoning body of research. An ever-growing number of universities include goddess courses in their curricula in a variety of departments. Buddhist goddesses, however, are all but absent from the growing corpus of cross-cultural goddess studies, anthologies, and encyclopedias. Providing a source book on Buddhist goddesses is of timely importance so that Buddhist scholarship can begin to inform and benefit from advances taking place in related fields and so that those who teach about Buddhism, goddesses, or religion and gender may gain access to this crucial body of knowledge.

Primarily, however, I use the term “goddess” to draw attention to the ongoing and lively engagement of the Buddhist tradition with the feminine divine. In this respect, Buddhism shares a largely unrecognized commonality with other religious traditions born on Indian soil. The female pantheon of Buddhism often mirrors developments in the Indic divine landscape at large, historically and thematically. Thus, the spectrum of Buddhist goddesses is similar in scope and type to that found in pan-Indic and Hindu religiosity. For example, Buddhism shares the broader Indian tendency to cast nature divinities as female. Indeed, Buddhist goddesses fill many roles similar to those held by goddesses in the surrounding traditions, encompassing an array of benefactions and forms of protection. Finally, there are goddesses of cosmic magnitude, identified with the primary forces of creation and energies of reality, capable of bestowing supreme liberation.

Readers of this volume will find here the sweeping panorama of the feminine divine in the Buddhist imaginal world. Nature divinities abound: mother earth, the grove goddess of Shakyamuni’s birthplace, lotus goddesses, mother nature figures, star and planet goddesses, goddesses of the dawn and night sky, grain goddesses, mountain goddesses, tree goddesses, and snake goddesses. We find Buddhist goddesses presiding over human fertility, the health of infants and children, wealth, agricultural abundance, healing, longevity, artistic inspiration, learning, music, love magic, and occult practices. There are goddesses who specialize in protection from fevers, epidemics, snakebite, demons, curses, astrological influences, and untimely death, as well as versatile goddesses with

encompassing powers to rescue the worshipper from any danger or mortal peril.

Other Buddhist goddesses have more explicitly salvific ministrations, supporting practitioners in the pursuit of renunciation, discipline, mental purification, wisdom, a fortunate rebirth, and progress on the path to enlightenment. There are goddesses who preside over heavenly paradises where votaries may join them after death and dwell in their enlightening presence. Moreover, Buddhism has exalted female deities to the pinnacle of the pantheon, to embody the loftiest metaphysical principles and goals of the tradition, including Buddhahood. Having documented this remarkably diverse female pantheon, I use the term “goddess” because I believe Buddhism merits a place among the goddess traditions of the world.