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Revisiting a Kashmiri-Style Buddhist Image of Vajrasatva with Consort

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1.



Fig. 1

Since I first studied and published this metal image of a divine couple, the object has been thoroughly examined, scientifically cleaned and restored (fig. 1) [1]. The exquisitely rendered sculpture debuted in the seventies of the last century when it was included in the exhibition of the renowned Pan-Asian collection formed by the prodigious collector of Asian art, Christian Humann [2]. It is a pleasure to revisit the object almost half a century later, as it has remained not only an intriguing and rare representation of Vajrayana Buddhist deities but, with a great deal of material from Kashmir and the contiguous regions in Western Tibet published since, it is now possible to throw more light on its origin and iconography.

When I first published it, I identified the two romantically disposed figures as Vajrasatva and Consort, from Kashmir and dated it to the 11th century [3]. In 1981 Ulrich Von Schroeder accepted the identification (though he used the generic Sanskrit expression Prajna [=Wisdom] for the lady) and the date [4]. However, he attributed it to “Kashmir or Spiti,” the latter being the name of a district in northern Himachal Pradesh, India, bordering on Western Tibet.

Four years later the sculpture was published again and this time the identification suggested was Akshobhya –Vajrasatva and Mamaki [5]. Here the authors assigned it to Gilgit (Pakistan) or Lahaul in India and dated it to “late 9th or early 10th century.” Thus the publication history of the bronze, considering its small size, is impressive.

Unusually, another closely related representation of the theme, also in metal, has come to light and was published early this century (fig.2) [6]. The sculpture is in the Potala Collection in Lhasa and is 17cm. high, which makes it slightly larger than the subject of our study. It will be interesting to describe the two together.



Fig. 2

2.

There is no doubt that the male of the pair in both instances represents Vajrasatva who is conceived as the sixth transcendental Buddha at the same level as the more familiar Vajrayana pentad of Buddhas, often referred to as the Dhyani Buddhas [7]. As seen here, Vajrasatva is usually represented as a regal rather than an ascetic bodhisatva. Appropriately, in both bronzes, the youthful figure is ornamented and crowned and wears a lower garment called *dhoti* of patterned material. However, in both, he sits in the meditation posture with the right leg placed on the left thigh. The positions of the arms and the two hand attributes are

characteristic of Vajrasatva: the right arm placed in front of the chest supporting the vertically placed *vajra* or thunderbolt on the palm, while the left arm encircling his partner grasps the bell with the hand with the handle facing the viewer.

This particular disposition of the two key implements of Vajrayana ritual is essential in the performance of *puja* and is observed both in life and art. Hence, in Nepal Vajrasatva is characterized as the divine priest [8]. This interpretation is further corroborated by the crown that Vajrasatva and the priests wear: both are adorned with the effigies of the pentand of the five Buddhas which is a cosmogonic symbol [9].

As to the female perched on Vajrasatva's left thigh in both representations, there seems to be some confusion among scholars. With reference to the Potala example, von Schroeder identifies her as Vajradhatishvari on the grounds that Vajrasatva here is homologous with the transcendental Buddha Akshobhya, especially because of the two elephants flanking the adorant in the center of the base [10]. Moreover the texts inform us that Vajrasatva is the yogic potential of a person, "as the essence of the Tathagatas, Akshobhya...; who has advanced...to the last three Bodhisattva stages, as indicated by his embracing Vajradhatishvari ('Queen of the Diamond Realm'), who is drawn from the yogin's own heart..." [11].

No description of Vajrasatva is included in the iconographical compendium called the *Sadhanamala* in Sanskrit, but in another contemporary text called *Advayavajrasamgraha* (Compilation by Advayavajra) Vajrasatva is a prominent deity and his consort is named Vajrasatvatmika [12]. Benoytosh Bhattacharya who edited the text informs us that Advayavajra lived in India in the 11th-12th century and was an eminent scholiast. Also according to Bhattacharya, when portrayed together, the couple should be shown in *yab-yum* (Tibetan for father-mother) or sexual embrace [13]. However, Advayavajra admonishes the reader that while regular images of Vajrasatva can be viewed by everyone, the *yab-yum* representation must never be shown to the uninitiated.

Thus, iconographically these two images are unusual. The couple is definitely not engaged in a sexual embrace but is perfectly decorous in exhibiting their amorous ardor. While explicit sexual embrace is a characteristic of Anuttarayoga tantras, the highest form of tantric meditational and ritual praxis, images where the deities are depicted in such modestly intimate postures belong to the lesser Yogatantra tradition.

3.



Fig. 3

That there are other differences between the two images under discussion is also clear. The artist responsible for the Potala bronze followed a well-established design for Buddhist figures that goes back several centuries in Kashmir and the Swat Valley as seen in scores of published images [14]. One of the most well known examples is an impressive figure of a teaching Buddha on a throne supported by an Atlas like figure of a yaksha with his two raised arms, flanked by two springing leogryphs beyond which are two *en face* lions (fig. 3). In the Potala bronze the leogryphs are omitted, and the lions replaced by two elephants as demanded by the association of Vajrasatva with Akshobhya. However, more importantly, the youthful figure in the center no longer supports the throne but with his right hand displays the gesture of adoration of the deity above (*tathagatavandanahasta*). Whether this was dictated by a textual prescription or reflects the whimsy of the patron or the artist remains unknown [15]. Above the throne is placed an open lotus on which sits the divine couple. In the Pan-Asian bronze, as may be seen from the illustration of the back, the seat is constructed in a different manner (fig. 4 & 5). From the plain base rises a tall support like a tree trunk abutting their backs. Noteworthy also is the contrast between the lower petals of the flower and those in the top tier where the copper inlaid dual eyes are prominent. This inlay at the back, which is generally plainer than the front, is rather unusual.

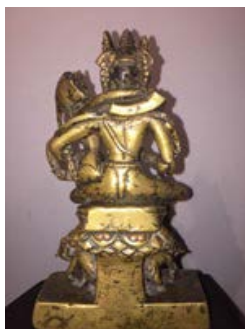


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

In the front also the artist of the ex-Pan-Asian collection bronze has used a completely different design for the base. Here on a plain shallow platform three elephants support the lotus (which also is of a different form than the other) on whose raised pericarp, as if on a stool or mound, sits the male figure with widely spread legs though in the same posture. This too is an unusual mode encountered in only another published example also in the Potala collection (fig. 6). Here the pentad of Buddhas is represented each on a simple lotus, supported by his characteristic animal symbol. The second from the left is Buddha or Tathagata Akshobhya because the animal below is the elephant and the gesture of his right hand is that of touching the earth. The presence of the pachyderm below both Vajrasatvas clearly associates him with Akshobhya Buddha and frequently in tantric texts he is characterized as the “yogin of Akshobhya” mentioned above.

Quoting from the *Advayavajrasamgraha*, Benoytosh Bhattacharya provides the following description of the visualization (*sadhana*) of Vajrasatva:

White-complexioned Vajrasattva originates from the syllable HUM. He has one face and two arms, the hands holding the attributes thunderbolt and the bell, both of which are marked with the thunderbolt sign. Moreover, he represents the astringent taste, the autumn season, the letters *ya*, *ra*, *la*, and *va* of the alphabet and the stretch of time from midnight to dawn. Alternatively he is named Dharmadhatu (essence of dharma) [16].

The fact that his complexion here is stated to be white would relate him to Vairochana rather than Akshobhya. Moreover, Bhattacharya without quoting a source, informs us that his consort is called Vajrasatvatmika, though elsewhere she is said to be Vajradhatishvari, who is further the consort of Buddha Ratnasambhava [17]. This sort of inconsistency is notable in the hand attributes that she is to hold. In some instances she is said to grasp the chopper (*kartri*) and the skullcup (*kapala*), two common emblems of female deities, and particularly of Nairatmya, personification of the abstract concept “no soul.”

In the ex-Pan-Asian bronze the left hand definitely holds the bell exactly as her partner does and the right coming around his shoulder grasps the thunderbolt. In the Potala image the left hand is broken and the right seems simply to be placed on the shoulder. Because the hand attributes are the same as those of Vajrasatva, I believe she should be better identified with Vajrasatvatmika or the soul of Vajrasatva rather than Vajradhatishvari, Locana or Mamaki.



Fig. 7

Another noteworthy detail, distinctive of Kashmir style bronzes, is the additional long garland that the god generally wears. This is also curiously the case with Avalokiteshvara images from the region and with both Vishnu and Shiva figures, though in the rest of north India the long floral garland known as a *vanamala* (of wild flowers) is a distinctive feature of Vishnu/Krishna alone, one of whose names is Vanamali or Wearer of the Wildflower garland [18]. Further distinctive of the females in Kashmiri art, both divine and human, is the additional headscarf that never obscures the face but hangs down the back (see fig. 7).

Thus these differences clearly demonstrate that when the two sculptures were produced the iconographic tradition about Vajrasatva was still fluid. Despite the need for consistency when representing divine forms, variations in visualizations were as prevalent among the yogins and adepts as were the deviations in style and aesthetic among the artists.

4.

This becomes further evident from comparisons between the two representations beyond what has already been noted. For instance, the differences between the designs of the base of the two bronzes must be due to the choice of the two artists rather than iconographic dictat. The Potala artist adopted a well established form of a yaksha supporting the throne though there is a new tweak introduced in the mode of expression in the figure's devotion, by saluting the deities above, as the earth goddess does at times from below the Buddha's seat. In the other composition the artist chose to provide three visible elephants (the fourth at the back is left to the imagination) supporting the lotus, thereby adopting the more Indian mode, different from the Atlas/yaksha motif common in the Buddhist art of Gandhara [19].

Another prominent expression of artistic ingenuity is the eschewing of the *yab yum* formula in favor of the more decorous mode of a cavorting couple. Apart from theological considerations mentioned above, noteworthy is the rarity of yab yum images among the corpus of Vajrayana art in the Kashmiri tradition in particular or generally in the Indian tradition. Moreover, the configuration is likely adopted from the Uma Maheshvara images, as seen in a contemporary sculpture from Kashmir (fig. 7) [20].

However, a significant difference is noteworthy not only in the postures of the Buddhist couple from the two Hindu deities but also between the two compositions. In the ex-Pan-Asian example (fig. 1) the legs of the female are enclosed by those of Vajrasatva, while in the Potala work (fig. 2) her legs strike the same posture,

but in front of his legs. Such differences, along with those in designs of the bases, could indicate that the two were created in the same atelier by two different artists, or both are products of the same hands. The presence of cold gold on the faces and the indigo on the hair of the Potala figures clearly indicate the object's long sojourn in Tibet. It is possible that such embellishment also once characterized the ex-Pan-Asian bronze and the pigments were removed in modern times before it came into the market. As to the inclusions of the three elephants, undoubtedly to symbolize the cardinal directions (*diggaja*), I refer to the rare bronze, also in the Potala collection, already cited (fig. 6). Here we encounter a similar arrangement of the fauna below each of the five transcendental Buddhas.

This bronze is an interesting work of art not only for its unusual depiction of the five Buddhas together in a row, each provided with his animal cognizant, but also for the Tibetan inscription on the base. As discussed by von Schroeder, it is possible to identify the donor –the honorable Bhyang Chub (cha'i Byang chub)– who commissioned this unusual image and thereby date it to the first half of the eleventh century [21]. He further characterized it as a work of one of 32 Kashmiri artists who were in the retinue of the famous Tibetan monk Rin chen bzang po (988–1055) on his return from Kashmir. If this is so, then the Pan-Asian bronze may well have served as the model for the base of the Byang Chub's bronze with the five transcendental Buddhas. Moreover, the sensuously modeled figural forms and more elegant stylistic features of the Vajrasatva couple may indicate an earlier date. It may be noted that Von Schroeder as well suggests a 10th-11th century date for the Potala couple. The base of this bronze with the yaksha adorant and the pair of lions indicates a likely Kashmir origin of the sculpture rather than the “Kashmir school” in western Tibet suggested by Von Schroeder. The attribution of the Pan-Asian figure to “Gilgit or Lahaul,” as noted earlier in this discussion, however, is unacceptable.

A delightful later painted version of the divine couple may be seen in a rare *thangka* in the Zimmerman Collection (fig. 8). It was executed in the 14th century in Western Tibet and has been published in great detail by David P. Jackson [22]. While it is rendered in a Newar inspired style, suggested by the author, there is nothing Newari about the composition of the two principal figures. Rather, undoubtedly, the artist responsible for the work was familiar with the Kashmir tradition as reflected in the two bronzes under discussion. However, he has followed his own Newari impulse in the delineation of the accoutrements as well as in the more linear plasticity of the figural forms and the dispositions of the two figures, though expressing the same *joie de vivre* as the two Kashmir couples, are notably different.



Fig. 8

Also remarkable in this painted version is that the goddess here clearly holds the bell in her left hand but the right hangs fondly down his right shoulder. This intimacy is further emphasized by the smiling faces placed cheek to cheek. It is as well clear that the *thangka* with numerous other figures depicts a mandala of the two deities and one wonders if the earlier Kashmir style bronzes were once parts of a three dimensional mandala. Their diminutive sizes would not be incompatible; alternatively, they could have been used in travelling shrines.

5.



Fig. 9

Finally, where and when the concept and iconography of Vajrasatva, if not the cult, originated in India remains unknown. Here, the artistic evidence seems to be more helpful than literature. That Kashmir can make a solid claim for the honor based on visual evidence is a strong possibility. To my knowledge, the earliest Indian artistic representation is a metal figure that, like the principal image under discussion, was also once in the Pan-Asian collection (fig. 9) [23]. Here again we notice the inventiveness of an unknown artist in the elaborate rocky base being crushed by a pair of composite half serpentine creature –known as *naga*– in adoring postures. The rocky formation of the base likely represents mount Meru, the axis mundi in Indian cosmogony. The elegant deity is further distinguished by five transcendental Buddhas in his elaborate crown though their exact identification remain difficult to determine. Interesting also is the accommodation of two tiny Buddhas depicted one above the other in the frontal lobe. Stylistically, this bronze is likely to have been masterfully modeled in the 8th century, which would be one of the earliest representations of Vajrasatva in the art of the subcontinent.

The inventiveness of another unknown Kashmiri sculptor is encountered again three centuries later, in another lively and unusual composition, this time accompanied by his spouse Vajrasatvatmika, in the principal image that is the subject of this discussion. A more linear and opulently mellifluous rendering of the figural forms with sensuous grace, whimsical touches and more exquisite chasing of details now replace the simple volumetric robustness of the earlier bronze. The sculpture which is the principal subject of this paper has been previously published in Pal 1977; von Schroeder 1981; Klimburg– Salter 1982; Reedy 1996; Christie's 2000.

After completing the article and sending it off for publication I discovered another interesting representation of the divine couple in *Buddhist Sculpture of Tibet*, vol. 2, Tibet and China by Ulrich von Schroeder (Hong Kong: Dharma Publication Ltd., 2001, pp.1110–1111, #s. 290D). It depicts the pair in militant (or dancing) postures on a lotus base surrounded by a flaming aureole (fig. 10). That both are here portrayed as awesome, belligerent figures is not only apparent from their postures but also from their facial expressions behind the cold gold paint with rolling painted eyes and the vertical hairdo for each colored in orange. In fact, with serpent ornaments slithering on their bodies they could have been mistaken for Bhairava and Kali (wrathful forms of Shiva and Parvati, the classic Hindu deities) but for their hand attributes. He holds the thunderbolt and bell in the conventional manner of Vajrasatva but she is certainly in a belligerent mood as she wields the chopper in her raised right hand as if to strike her partner. The attribute in her left hand is difficult to recognize but is likely the skull cup.

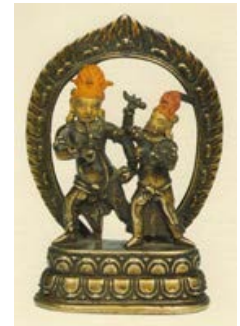


Fig. 10

Von Schroeder characterizes it as a work of “Tibetan Monastic Period Pala Style” and dates it to the 12th-13th century. Thus, he considers it to have been made in Tibet in a style derived from eastern India though it should be pointed out that no Indian example is known of this particular composition either textually or visually. Unlike the two genteel and loving couple represented in the two-seated figures discussed above, clearly both are portrayed as aggressive in this brass image reflecting the wrathful aspects of both deities.



Dr. Pratapaditya Pal

Dr. Pratapaditya Pal is a world-renowned Asian art scholar. He was born in Bangladesh and grew up in Kolkata. In 1967, Dr. Pal moved to the U.S. and took a curatorial position as the 'Keeper of the Indian Collection' at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, he has lived in the United States ever since. In 1970, he joined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and worked there as the Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art until he retired in 1995. He has also been Visiting Curator of Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art at the Art Institute of Chicago (1995–2003) and Fellow for Research at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (1995–2005). Dr. Pal was General Editor of *Marg* from 1993 to 2012. He has written over 60 books on Asian art, whose titles include, *Art of the Himalayas: Treasures from Nepal and Tibet* (1992), *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (1999) and *The Arts of Kashmir* (2008). He has furthermore written over 200 papers on Asian art. In 2009 Dr. Pal was awarded the Padma Shri for his extraordinary contribution to the sphere of art.

ENDNOTES

1. The technical report is available with the present owner of the bronze. The broken central lobe of the crown with the effigy of the Buddha missing in the original has been recently restored.
2. Pal 1977, p. 56. Since then the bronze has been published several times. See Christie's 2000, lot 14 notes: Literature
P. Pal, *The Sensuous Immortals*, 1978, cat. no. 29.
U. von Schroeder, *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes*, 1981, fig. 20C.
D. Klimburg-Salter, *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path*, 1982, pl. 38.
C. Reedy, *Himalayan Bronzes, Technology, Style, and Choices*, 1997, fig. K92.
3. See n.2. A word about the spelling of the suffix *sattva* as *satva* throughout this essay. In this I follow Dr. Gauriswar Bhattacharya 2010 who has convincingly demonstrated that in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit the word *sattva* is consistently spelt with one rather than two “t”s.
4. Von Schroeder 1981, p. 126, #20c.
5. Possel, Neven and Mankodi 1985, pp.82,85, fig. 105.
6. Von Schroeder 2001, p. 154, #41A

7. The Sanskrit expression *dhyani* meaning “meditation” was invented by Newari Pandit Amritananda, an informant of the “founding scholar” of Himalayan art, Brian Hodgson, in the 19th century, but is not found in older Buddhist literature, where the word “tathagata” is preferred to designate the five Transcendental Buddhas, each of whom presides over a family (*kula*) of deities.
8. Bhattacharya 1958, p. 74. In Pala sculptures and Nepali paintings one often sees the Buddhist priest seated holding the thunderbolt and the bell in the same positions.
9. See Pratapaditya Pal, *Art of Nepal* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1985), pp. 106-107, #S27 for a typical priest’s crown in metal.
10. Bhattacharya 1958, p. 51
11. Lessing and Wayman 1978, p.131.
12. Bhattacharya 1958, pp.48 and 75
13. The Sanskrit expression for the Tibetan is *yuganaddha* which means “pair-wise united” upon attaining which there is nothing further to learn.
14. See Von Schroeder 2001
15. As far as I know no text has yet come to light that provides detailed instructions for the design of the bases of Indian images. The Kashmiri artists appear to have been particularly inventive.
16. Bhattacharya 1958, p.75 for the original Sanskrit passage.
17. Bhattacharya 1958, p. 74
18. Significantly this garland is not commonly seen in South Indian Vishnu images.
19. Yakshas supporting structures are encountered in earlier Indian art at Sanchi, Kanheri and other sites.
20. See also Pal 1975, pp. 52–53, no. 2 for a bronze Hindu triad where the three spouses are seated in two different positions, one with crossed legs and the other two with dangling legs akin to the consort of Vajrasatva.
21. Von Schroeder 2001, pp.138-139
22. Jackson 2010, p. 123, fig. 62.31
23. Pal 1977, p. 47, fig. 22.

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