

Introducing the YESHE TSOGYAL BANNER

Prepared by Rita Gross and Judith Simmer-Brown

The Shambhala Office of Practice and Education is pleased to announce a new banner that Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche has selected for shrinerooms in Centers throughout the international mandala. This banner depicts Yeshe Tsogyal, the mother of Tibetan Buddhism, and renowned symbol of the feminine principle. After being supplicated by the Commission on the Status of Women and Feminine Principle, Rinpoche felt that the coincidence of his marriage this year marked an auspicious time to add a representation of Yeshe Tsogyal to our mandala. He has worked with the artist, Cynthia Moku, in consultation with his father-in-law, His Eminence Tertön Namkha Drimed Rabjam Rinpoche, on the actual design and symbolism.

Yeshe Tsogyal is the most important woman in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, appearing both in historical record as well as symbolic context. She was a queen in 8th century Tibet and became the primary student and spiritual consort of her root guru, Padmasambhava, known as Guru Rinpoche. As an accomplished practitioner, she also became a renowned wisdom-*dākinī* or *khandro* (*mkha’-‘gro*), embodying through her life example and teachings the wisdom dimensions of Vajrayāna realization and practice. As a *dākinī*, she represents the nature of the radiant wisdom-mind of all sentient beings; she also serves especially as protector and nurturer of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Her spiritual biography or *namthar* (*rnam-thar*) is a sacred classic of Tibetan literature (see below for bibliographic references).

BANNER SYMBOLISM AND PLACEMENT

Above all, Yeshe Tsogyal is a representation of wisdom in our Shambhala Buddhist lineage. Wisdom, in this case, is not merely intellectual knowledge but the natural intuitive wisdom-mind uncovered in meditation practice. She is depicted standing with one foot forward, wearing the garb of a royal princess--*chuba* robe with a *bamdian*, or hand-woven ornamental apron, and a brocaded outer robe. These three aspects of her clothing are decorated with symbols indicating the five elements. Her boots are appliqued and her entire body is adorned with silken scarves. Her tiara crown is studded with jewels in the five colors, and her jewelry is exquisite. Her hair is tied into a topknot, adorned with

a gold filigree design, an extension of the crown. Her expression is gentle and peaceful.

In her raised right hand she holds a two-sided hand drum, called a *damaru* (*rnga chung*), traditionally used in tantric ritual practice. This small hand drum has a short jeweled chain knotted by a cloud-scroll pendant and the triple-ribbon chevron tassel. The hand drum, held in the hand of skillful means, calls forth with longing to the lineage of yogins and yoginīs, asking them to bless the assembly and to proclaim the great joy of seeing things as they really are. Her left hand holds the *kapala* (*thod-pa*) or skullcup, symbolizing wisdom in the *ḍākinī* tradition, filled with a precious longevity vase. She stands on a moon disk at the center of a lotus, and her lotus pedestal is adorned with peony flowers (the flower of Shambhala). Surrounding her body and head are nimbus circles of light. Above her are the sun and moon, evoking nonduality. Three flaming jewels before her remain as offerings, representing the indestructible nature of the three jewels of Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

Rinpoche has suggested that this banner be hung in the main shrine rooms of our centers, near the doorway or preferably opposite the Rigden thangka of the main shrine. Banners will be available through the Shambhala Shop (www.shambhalashop.com). Prints for personal use are available directly through the artist, Cynthia Moku (www.cmoku.com).

INTRODUCING THE BANNER TO YOUR CENTER

The Shambhala Office of Practice and Education has suggested that the banner be introduced to our Centers with an evening or day-long program on Yeshe Tsogyal, describing her importance and meaning for our lineage. Once the banner has been ordered and received from the Shambhala Shop, it is recommended that an appropriate event be scheduled, with talk, unveiling, and small reception open to everyone, members and the general public. The talk could be given by a senior teacher from the Center.

The Commission on the Status of Women and the Feminine Principle was asked to develop materials for teachers to provide background and context for this special event. The outline below provides essential points, and an article published by senior teacher and sangha member Rita Gross, and resources for further study are appended at the end. These materials could support a single

talk or several talks, depending upon the inspiration of your Center.

I. Yeshe Tsogyal in the Shambhala Buddhist Lineage

Yeshe Tsogyal has long been a key figure in the Nyingma lineage, important to the Vidyadhara and the Sakyong. In the “Supplication to the Shambhala Lineage,” she is paired with “Lotus-born Padmākara” as “Wisdom Yeshe Tsogyal.” Her name means literally “wisdom ocean queen,” and her blessing is associated with the development of genuine nondual wisdom in our practice. Your event should begin with chanting the Shambhala Lineage Supplication.

She is also supplicated in a chant composed by the Fifteenth Karmapa that is sometimes done just after the Seven-Line Supplication in Vajrayāna practice. This Yeshe Tsogyal chant serves as a complement to the chant to Guru Rinpoche in seven lines, for it expresses the aspects of wisdom, protection, and nurture associated with the indestructible realization of Guru Rinpoche, the father of Tibetan Buddhism. The Yeshe Tsogyal chant appears as part of the Rain of Blessings practice, and it is recommended that you include this chant in your event. After the Shambhala Lineage Supplication, chant first the Seven-Line Supplication, and then the Supplication to Yeshe Tsogyal. (For use in your centers, please copy this directly from the Rain of Blessings chant.)

Supplication to Yeshe Tsogyal

Mother of all the victorious ones, dharmadhātu Samantabhadri,
Very kind, only mother who protects the subjects of Tibet,
Bestower of supreme siddhi, chief among the dākinīs of great bliss,
Yeshe Tsogyal, we supplicate at your feet.

Grant your blessings so that outer, inner, and secret obstacles may be
pacified.

Grant your blessings so that the lives of the gurus may be long.

Grant your blessings so that this kalpa of disease, famine, and war may be
pacified.

Grant your blessings so that the casting of curses, spells, and sorcery may
be pacified.

Grant your blessings so that life, glory, and prajñā may increase.

Grant your blessings so that our wishes may be fulfilled spontaneously.

This was written by Khakhyap Dorje [Karmapa XV], the boy nurtured by the jñānaḍākinīs. May virtue and goodness increase! Translated by the Vajravairochana Translation Committee, used with permission.

This chant clarifies Yeshe Tsogyal's importance for especially the Dzogchen lineage of Samantabhadra, the primordial Buddha of the Nyingma. First, she is called "mother of all the victorious ones," the buddhas of the three times, which is also an epithet for the Prajñāpāramitā, the "wisdom-gone-beyond" in the sūtra tradition. She is the mother because it is through realizing our wisdom-minds that we and all sentient beings will become buddhas. Next, she is called Samantabhadrī, the feminine aspect the primordial Buddha of the Nyingma, Samantabhadra, also known as the All-Good One; therefore, she is the feminine aspect of basic goodness. She is called "very kind" for she is the nurturer of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. As a wisdom-ḍākinī, it is she who bestows the supreme siddhi of enlightenment. She is the queen of all "great-bliss" ḍākinīs, those who awaken our most intimate experience of wisdom of bliss and emptiness, the highest realization of meditation. The Vidyādhara said of mahāsukha, or great bliss,

mahāsukha is an actual experience of bliss—a physical, psychological, total experience of joy that comes from being completely without discursive thoughts, completely in the realm of nonthought. One unites with the nondual awake state of being. (*Heart of the Buddha*, 1991, p. 168.)

The Vajrayāna practitioner asks for Yeshe Tsogyal's blessings in six areas of support. First, she is supplicated so that obstacles in our lives, practice, and minds may be removed or disarmed. She is asked to support the long lives of our teachers, upon whom we rely for instruction, guidance, and blessings. She is asked to mitigate the forces of setting-sun world—both the dark age of "disease, famine and war" and the human karma of struggle that expresses itself as "curses, spells, and sorcery." She is asked to nurture the blossoming of long life, the glory, and the *prajñā*, or penetrating insight, of all beings. Lastly, she is asked to fulfill the dharmic wishes of all practitioners.

II. Yeshe Tsogyal, presentation on her life and meaning—Essential Points to be presented and discussed. (It is suggested to initially present these points in the

following order, and then stress their inseparability and inter-connectedness.)

A: The woman Yeshe Tsogyal: According to all Tibetan stories about her, Yeshe Tsogyal was an historical woman who lived in Tibet in the eighth century. (For discussion of her historical dates, see Dowman, p. 343.) Like the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, she had a human conception, birth, life and death, and became enlightened in a single lifetime. As princess of the kingdom of Karchen, she married the king of Tibet, Trisong Detsen, and became one of his queens. Her spiritual teacher was Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche, who is always credited with having a pivotal role in the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet. She was his most important student, and after his death she propagated the Vajrayāna teachings throughout Tibet, and so was an important teacher in her own right, indispensable to Guru Rinpoche's work and success. As an historical, real woman, Yeshe Tsogyal is important as an enlightened role model for women in a context that often seems lacking in female role models. Yeshe Tsogyal was chosen by the Sakyong precisely because she was a real Tibetan woman, rather than an abstract non-human symbol like Tārā or Prajñāpāramitā.

According to the Nyingma accounts, Yeshe Tsogyal achieved buddhahood, the immortality of the vajra body, and continues to come in visions to those of pure aspiration.

Events in the life of Yeshe Tsogyal:

- Prehistory and birth
- Youth and marriage
- Meeting the guru
- Teaching and instruction
- Practice and retreat
- Signs of accomplishment
- Benefitting beings
- Buddhahood

B: Yeshe Tsogyal as representation of the feminine principle:

Inseparable from her humanity is Yeshe Tsogyal as manifestation of the feminine principle--experiential nondual wisdom that takes female form (as well as male form) when it is represented symbolically. This means that the historical Yeshe Tsogyal is also an emanation of the enlightened feminine principle in much the same way that Guru Rinpoche is the emanation of the enlightened masculine

principle. Feminine wisdom and masculine skillful means are the two axes of enlightened mind—wisdom without skillful means is ineffectual, and means without wisdom is not skillful. Only when each has been cultivated in our practice and the two are experienced in union, inseparably, can our enlightenment blossom.

In the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, Yeshe Tsogyal appears on three levels: in a physically embodied, historical, human form (*nirmāṇakāya*), she appears as the princess of Karchen, Yeshe Tsogyal, a queen of Tibet. In a visionary, symbolic body (*sambhogakāya*), she is known as Vajrayoginī, one of the most important female *vidams* (deities used as a support for meditation) of Tibetan Buddhism, practiced as a Vajrayāna ritual in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage. In her most subtle, formless essence of open space aspect (*dharmakāya*), she is Samantabhadrī, the female side of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra, the essence of basic goodness, the direct nature of mind, and ultimate source of the lineage in Nyingma Buddhism. (See Simmer-Brown, pp. 65-69, for a description of these three levels of her manifestation.)

In her story and symbolism, these two aspects of her being, as historic human being and as manifestation of the Buddha's three-fold manifestation (*trikāya*) are always intricately interwoven. Telling one side of the story without the other distorts the story. For example, the story of her conception and birth is told twice, once for her as manifestation of the feminine principle, and once recounting her human parents and their conception of her. As both an ordinary human being and a manifestation of the Buddha's three-fold manifestation, Yeshe Tsogyal is no different in her makeup from us, except that she has recognized her inherent nature more completely. In this way also, she is our role model and guide.

As the feminine wisdom aspect of the lineage, she has also taken the role of protector of the wisdom journey of the Vajrayāna practitioner. As such, she and her retinue ensure the integrity of the teachings, the teacher, the students, the time and the place of Vajrayāna practice and transmission. It is her responsibility to guarantee the proper continuation of the teachings, and of the community of practitioners. This is why the Vajrayana student asks for her blessings in a prayer.

C: Is the story of Yeshe Tsogyal true? Western historians of Tibetan

Buddhism do not mention Yeshe Tsogyal in their accounts of the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet because they regard her as a legendary figure. Most western students of Tibetan Buddhism are much more aware of Guru Rinpoche's story than they are of the accounts of Yeshe Tsogyal. However, Tibetans themselves treasure her story--they regard Guru Rinpoche without Yeshe Tsogyal as incomplete, just as the masculine principle is incomplete without the feminine principle. She was essential to his full manifestation as a Vajrayāna teacher, to his Buddha activity, to his creation of the collection of *termas* or hidden treasure teachings, and to his effective subjugation of obstacles to dharma practice. As practitioners, we would do well to take Tibetan sensibilities as a model for ourselves. Even if Yeshe Tsogyal's life were not established historically, we still must tell her story because Guru Rinpoche's life and activity would be incomplete without her.

III: Practical Suggestions structuring a talk or program—an outline

Sitting with lit shrine

Teacher enters, lights shrine, all stand

Chants:

Supplication to the Shambhala Lineage

Seven-Line Supplication to Padmasambhava

Supplication to Yeshe Tsogyal

Opening bow

Short Talk on Yeshe Tsogyal

Her life

Unveil the banner

Banner symbolism

Yeshe Tsogyal's meaning

Questions and discussion

Closing Dedications of Merit

Short Reception

Alternatively, there could be a longer program, with a full talk on her life, ending with the unveiling of the banner. Then, in another afternoon talk, her symbolism and meaning for Tibetan Buddhism could be explained.

RESOURCES FOR STUDY OF YESHE TSOGYAL

This packet includes a published article focusing on Yeshe Tsogyal the woman, examining key events in her life and their meaning for contemporary practitioners. It is quite accessible, and provides a good introduction to Yeshe Tsogyal's life example. The author, Rita Gross, is a senior teacher in Shambhala as well as being a longtime scholar of women and religion.

"Yeshe Tsogyel: Enlightened Consort, Great Teacher, Female Role Model" by Rita M. Gross, from *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet*, edited by Janis Dean Willis. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1987). Used with permission, attached with a pdf link.

Sacred Biographies of Yeshe Tsogyal: There are three English translations of the sacred biography or *namthar* (*rnam-thar*) of Yeshe Tsogyel, listed in the order recommended for study. (If the teacher is unfamiliar with this material, it is recommended that at least one of these translations be consulted.)

1) Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo. *Lady of the Lotus-Born: the Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Committee. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999). Note: the translation committee's introduction to this book is excellent.

2) Keith Dowman. *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1996). Note: this translation contains a great deal of supplementary information and explanation.

3) Nam-mkha'i snying-po. *Mother of Knowledge: the Enlightenment of Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal*, oral translation by Tarthang Tulku. (Oakland, CA: Dharma Press, 1983).

Symbolic Yeshe Tsogyal: Several additional sources are helpful in exploring the symbolic meanings of Yeshe Tsogyal in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. These two sources place her in the context of the feminine principle altogether. These sources would be suitable for Vajrayāna students, especially sadhakas.

1) Anne Carolyn Klein. *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.) In this collection of essays,

please consult pp. 15-24 and Part III.

2) Judith Simmer-Brown. *Ḍākinī's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism*. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001.) The sections from pp. 65-69 and chapter Six on the human ḍākinī are especially appropriate.