



COVER: Treasure Wall at the installation of the exhibition 'Myriad Treasures' at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, spring 2020 (detail) (see p. 53)

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Women in Action: Images of Women in the Buddhist Art of Medieval Eastern India and Nepal

Jinah Kim

In a recently concluded exhibition on Nepalese Buddhist ritual art, 'Dharma and Punya: Buddhist Ritual Art of Nepal' (Cantor Art Gallery, Worcester, MA; 4 September–14 December 2019), one of the first objects in the display was an early 15th century *paubha* (the Newar term for a painting on cloth) of Ushnishavijaya, a Buddhist goddess propitiated for longevity (Figs 1, 1a and 1b). The painting bears a colophon with a date of 1412 CE (Nepal Era 532). Now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the *paubha* is of great historical importance for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is one of the earliest surviving pictorial records of a grand performance of the Laksha Chaitya Vrata, a Newar Buddhist ritual that is often conducted 'while mourning the death of a family member, with the purpose of transferring the merit to the deceased' (Lewis and Bajracharya, 2019, p. 56). The painting's art historical importance also lies in its rare portrayal of a woman in action in a position of authority in a Buddhist setting. In the left-hand corner on the bottom register, we see a Buddhist priest or ritual master—a *vajracharya*—dressed in white and wearing a red, conical cap (see Fig. 1a). He is seated cross-legged before a *homa* (fire) and an array of ritual accoutrements. Seated close behind him is a woman in a red blouse, her right hand held up in the gesture of instruction (Skt *vitarka mudra*). Along with her authoritative posture, that she is an intimate and equal partner of the *vajracharya* is indicated by the proximity of their knees, since the group of devotees behind her (representing some of the image's sponsors; the others are on the opposite side) is given a small gap and they all kneel with hands in the gesture of prayer (*anjali mudra*).

On her forehead in the hair parting is the red mark (*sindur*) that is customary for married women among Hindu households on the Indian subcontinent today, signalling that she is the officiating *vajracharya*'s wife—or '*guruju-ma*', as such women are reverently addressed in Newar Buddhist communities still today. While *sindur* is no longer as commonly worn by married Newar Buddhist women in Nepal, this painting suggests that it was in fact a custom in the early 15th century. In a way, finding women like this *guruju-ma* in the surviving art historical record sheds light on continuity and change in Indic Buddhist practices, especially regarding the roles of women, about which texts authored by men in Buddhist monastic institutions remain largely silent.

A lot of ink has already been spilled over the discovery of women in the historical records of pre-modern South Asia (which includes both India and Nepal). The evidence of women's active participation in religious activities in medieval South India, for example, especially in Andhra (now split into the two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh) and Tamil Nadu, has been well studied through quantitative and qualitative analysis of donative records of temple construction and maintenance (Talbot,

Fig. 1 Myriad stupas with Ushnishavijaya
Nepal, 1412
Opaque watercolour on cloth, 84.46 x 58.42 cm
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
Zimmerman Family Collection,
Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund (91.469)
(Photograph: Travis Fullerton)
(Image © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)





Fig. 1a Detail of the bottom register of the painting in Figure 1 showing a *vajracharya* and his wife (*guruju-ma*) with devotees

1991; Orr, 2000; Kaimal, 2002). Unfortunately, such epigraphic data is limited in eastern India, the area of the most substantial Buddhist activities in the subcontinent until 1200 CE, partly due to the nature of the surviving material evidence: the major building materials in the Gangetic plain were bricks. These were not as long-lasting as the stone commonly used for temples in South India, which survive with extensive inscriptions on their walls. In this context, another important archive of evidence that can support our search for women in pre-modern South Asia is the visual records of religious donations (Kim, 2012; Linrothe, 2017). Whether identified textually or not, the iconography of the female body is distinctly marked by the depiction of breasts in South Asian art. Their representation bears out the involvement of women in religious activities, the area in which we see the greatest evidence of women's social activity in a highly patriarchal society. In general, representations of women in art suggest that religion was one of the very few avenues for women to engage publicly in pre-modern South Asia.

In searching for women in action in the visual records, we get a rare glimpse of the little-documented phenomenon of the 'married-householder Buddhist priest' system (Gellner, 2001): the female partners of *vajracharya* that made such a system possible. The art historical evidence collected here further supports that Newar Buddhism is a direct linear descendant of late Indian Buddhism. It also suggests that a married monk who had gone through Vajrayana initiation (Skt *diksha*) was established as a ritual and spiritual authority by the beginning of the 12th century in Nepal, where Indic Buddhist institutions were domesticized and began to creatively adapt Brahmanical rites of passages like *samskara* (purification ceremonies; Newar Buddhist

samskara include ten important life-cycle rituals, called the Dasa Karma ['Ten Acts'; Kaji, 2010]), temple rituals and *vrata* (religious observances) within a Buddhist frame (Lewis, 2019; Rospatt, 2014). While most representations of *vajracharya* couples suggest that the normative Indic gender hierarchy of male superiority was upheld, some art historical and epigraphic evidence does suggest that women had access to wealth and took care of business, especially dealing with the dead.

The 1412 Ushnishavijaya *paubha* is an exceptional visual document that depicts a woman as an authority figure, giving instruction, taking charge: it is as if she manifests the action in the real world while her partner, holding vajra and *ghanta* ('bell'), merely mirrors and channels Vajrasattva, the ultimate teacher. In most known *paubha* and Nepalese manuscripts of 1500 CE or later that include a ritual scene, a *vajracharya* is almost always depicted with his male assistant, a '*vajracharya* in standing', rather than his wife (Brown, 2017, pp. 271–72). Even *paubha* that date to the 15th century or earlier usually show a single *vajracharya* officiating a ritual with a male assistant behind, as seen in the Achala *paubha* and the Surya mandala *paubha* in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (acc. nos. 1994.452 and 2012.462, respectively). In another rare example, the 1495 CE Vasudhara mandala *paubha* now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art shows a female figure standing just behind the officiating *vajracharya* (Fig. 2). Her feet are depicted as if she has just walked onto the scene to bring something in.

That the balance of male and female was important to the maker(s) of the Ushnishavijaya painting and knowledge experts like the *vajracharya* and his wife may also be discerned in another feature of the bottom register of this work: in the central

panel divided into three compartments, a man and a woman look on from either side while musicians and dancers perform in the centre (see Fig. 1b). A group of musicians and dancers is a typical motif depicted in this area of a composition, often representing offerings to the deity invoked. Here, the man and woman are seated on raised, throne-like seats to each side of the ecstatic performance. The man has an elephant behind him, while a horse accompanies the woman. They represent an abbreviated rendition of the *saptaratnani*, the Seven Jewels of a *chakravartin*, or universal monarch (the wheel, wish-granting gem, sword/general, treasurer, queen, elephant and horse). The so-called *saptaratna* motif appears commonly as an offering, especially in the case of image donations relating to mortuary rites, from at least the 10th century in eastern India, and is one of the standard offerings to tantric Buddhist deities in *sadhana* literature (Bhattacharya, 2000, pp. 51–52; Sinclair, 2014, pp. 241–42; English, 2002, p. 435). This *saptaratna* motif changes over time in Nepal—a topic requiring more space than available here. Cursorily speaking, it takes on some additional characters after a phase of abbreviation, so that by the 17th century the male figure, often depicted with an elephant, also appears with attendant figures and has even been misunderstood as a portrait of King Pratapamalla (r. 1641–74) (Pal, 1978, p. 86). The Ushnishavijaya *paubha* may not be the earliest example to present the *saptaratna* motif in such a manner, but the symmetrical arrangement signals due emphasis on male-female balance when seen together with the pairing of the main ritualist and his wife.

While a woman as a religious authority is rarely encountered in the surviving Indic Buddhist art, this 15th century *guruju-ma* is not without a precedent. As discussed elsewhere (Kim, 2019, pp. 92–93), there are at least two 12th century examples from Nepal that depict a *vajracharya* or a non-celibate monk with his wife. One example appears on the painted wood book covers of a manuscript of the *Panchakasha* (*Five Protections*) sutra dated 1135 CE, now in the San Diego Museum of Art (acc. no. 1990.156; see *ibid.*, fig. 8). In the second example, from a blue-black paper manuscript of the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* (*The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Verses*; a Mahayana text), a finely dressed woman is seated on a throne right behind a Buddhist master with a white cap and with his hands in a teaching gesture (*dharmachakraparvartana mudra*), opposite a family of devotees (Fig. 3). This seated master is dressed in a diaphanous white garment with an additional layer of a patterned textile draped over his thighs and a *yogapatta* (yogic strap) wrapped around his left knee. When seen in comparison with the main male devotee, it is clear that he has a shaven head under the white cap. The woman behind the teaching master is slightly shorter than him, but the difference in stature is relatively little pronounced. Their bodies are portrayed overlapping in a single frame and they are seated on the same throne, as if they are in fact in unison. The boy who sits between and below them leaves no doubt as to the couple's conjugal relationship, and on the parting of the woman's head is again a trace of *sindur*, suggesting her marital status. She may not appear as authoritative as the instruction-

Fig. 1b Detail of the bottom register of the painting in Figure 1 showing a man and a woman looking on from either side while musicians and dancers perform in the centre



giving *guruju-ma* of the Ushnishavijaya *paubha*, but she certainly holds a position of superiority over the devotees. The unnamed artist has carefully delineated her ornaments so that the most elaborate are in her hair, in comparison with the other women in the scene. If this Buddhist master can be identified as a *vajracharya*, this portrait shows that his wife (and son) constituted an important part of his spiritual authority in practice, especially when addressing a family.

The figure of a Buddhist ritual master with a conical cap holding vajra and *ghanta* appears frequently on stone sculptures at many eastern Indian Buddhist sites (Bautze-Picron, 1995, p. 62). It is unclear if these ritualists in the visual record in fact represent a married sacerdotal lineage like the *vajracharya* and *shakya* (short for *shakyabhiikshu* ['ordained Buddhist monk']—a hereditary Newar Buddhist caste in Nepal) lineages of the Kathmandu valley came to be. In most cases, we see only a lone ritualist on one side, with devotees or the donors of the sculpture on the other. One rare example raises the tantalizing possibility that our *guruju-ma* had her forerunner about four centuries earlier in India. A stone stele of the goddess of light, Marichi, depicts her in her eight-armed, three-faced form riding a horse-drawn chariot (Fig. 4). She stands victoriously with her foremost right hand raised and holding a vajra. Appearing to spring out from the lively flame that emits from her are the five Tathagatas (Ratnasambhava, Akshobhya, Vairocana, Amoghasiddhi and Amitabha; contrary to what Donaldson reports [2001, p. 108], Amoghasiddhi holds his right hand in low *abhaya mudra* [the gesture of fearlessness]). Most remarkable for the present discussion are the small human figures to either side of the goddess's feet. On the left, next to

her right foot, kneel a man and a woman with their hands in *anjali mudra* (Fig. 4a). Although miniature in size and cursory in rendering, it is clear that they are depicted with an array of jewellery. On the other side sits a Buddhist master holding vajra and *ghanta*, just like Newar *vajracharya* (Fig. 4b). He wears a tall, elaborate crown and ornaments. Next to him, knee to knee, sits a woman who is also bedecked with jewellery and has a more pronounced hairdo than the woman on the other side. The woman's right arm and the priest's left arm overlap and are virtually intertwined. This proximity between the priest and the woman may be due to space constraints, but it seems unlikely that a ritual master would be represented with a female devotee in such physical proximity even if we discount the possibility of these miniature figures being verisimilar portraits. Moreover, the duo are represented on a higher platform than the devotee couple. The circumstances leading to the image's production and use are unknown. Given the rectangular shape of the stele, the form of the goddess and certain stylistic features, it is likely that it hails from one of the Odishan Buddhist sites and dates to the late 10th century. If the proposal to read the couple as a *vajracharya* and his wife/female partner is tenable, then this stele suggests that the Newar Buddhist system of married-householder priests had an antecedent among the *vajracharya* ritualists that served Buddhist communities in eastern India.

Such early images of the female partner/wife of a *vajracharya* may seem passive, as if she plays only a supporting role. Other than the rare image of the *guruju-ma* in the Ushnishavijaya *paubha*, women are rarely depicted in an active role. Kneeling piously with hands folded together in *anjali* is the most

Fig. 2 Detail of a Vasudhara mandala showing a ritual scene with a woman standing behind a *vajracharya* and in front of a male assistant. Nepal, 1495. Mineral pigments on cotton cloth, 110.49 x 84.13 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. From the Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Museum Associates. Purchase (M.77.19.7).





Fig. 3 Painting from an *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* manuscript showing a Buddhist master with his family teaching a family of devotees
Nepal, c. mid-12th century
Pigments, gold and ink on blue-black paper, dimensions unknown
Private collection, Kathmandu
(Photograph by the author)

common manner in which figures of women appear on religious donations. Exceptional cases exist, such as that of a monastic woman named Gautami, who appears as the sole patron of a Buddha stele now in the Indian Museum in Kolkata; she sits comfortably with one knee raised while holding an incense burner in one hand and making a greeting gesture (*bandana mudra*) with the other (Kim, 2012, pp. 221–23). Examples may also be found among the corpus of images which have representations of two women as donors. A stone slab probably from Bodhgaya (in India's Bihar state) in the National Museum, New Delhi, provides a glimpse of women in action in circa 11th century eastern India (Figs 5 and 5a). A number of similar rectangular slabs are known from Bodhgaya, many divorced from their original architectural fabric and sculptural programme (Bautze-Picron, 1995, p. 59). Some are believed to have been image pedestals, while others may have been sculptural members of the lower portions of votive stupas, which are ubiquitous in Bodhgaya. Commonly seen in these slabs is a ritual tableau: on one side, a *vajracharya* wearing a conical hat and holding vajra and *ghanta* is seated before various

ritual implements, including a *kalasha* (water vessel), an incense burner, food offerings and a *pothi* (a type of manuscript, represented as a long, rectangular bar) installed on a single-legged stand, while the patron(s) sponsoring the ritual appear(s) on the other side. In the case of the National Museum slab, two women are seen, kneeling with their right knees raised (see Fig. 5a). The first holds her hands in *anjali* while the woman behind her holds up a full tray, most likely an offering plate for the ritual. It is impossible to know what prompted these two women to sponsor a ritual and this stone slab, or who they were. The inscription above this scene is the so-called 'Dharma relic', a consecration verse (from the *Pratityasamutpada gatha*; Boucher, 1991); it does not identify the women. Although we cannot construe the specific historical context of the sculpture's production and installation, archaeological and visual clues help us conjecture a socio-economic picture of women in which the two women took charge of mortuary rituals to ensure a better afterlife for a deceased person, most likely their husband. Here, it is important to remember that the unnamed artists responsible for making religious images often made

a great effort to differentiate and signal the social status of the patrons they depicted. In other words, the miniature human figures in these religious donations may not be verisimilar portraits, but they are *abstract portraits*, representing the persons portrayed in abstraction.

The two women on the Bodhgaya slab are rather different from many representations of female

figures in eastern India who appear as sponsors of rituals and images: they lack ornaments, whereas laywomen in Buddhist images are invariably depicted with jewellery and ornaments, as seen in the Marichi stele. The damage to the first woman's head and abrasion to the surface make it difficult to be absolutely certain, but the only ornament they wear, if any, seems to be small, round earrings.



Fig. 4 Marichi
India, probably Odisha,
c. late 10th century
Stone, 97.8 x 58.4 cm
National Museum,
New Delhi (80-1351)
(Photograph by the author)

Perhaps their modest appearance conveys their limited economic status. Yet, the women did have some economic means at their disposal to commission a stone slab at a major pilgrimage centre, which was possibly part of a larger project like a votive stupa. The composition and the iconography suggest that the two women sponsored the ritual alone. Given their long hair tied in buns, they are not monastics. Could their appearance bereft of ornaments imply something beyond their economic status? Is it possible that the two women represent widowed co-wives (or a widow and the husband's female family relation)? This is complete conjecture, although another iconographic element in the slab lends support for the possible funerary context of the ritual depicted: a row of seated Buddhas in meditation.

A row of meditating Buddhas appears commonly on other, similar stone slabs of the 11th or 12th century found at sites like Bodhgaya and Sarnath (in today's Uttar Pradesh). The number of Buddhas repeated in these slabs varies, and does not seem to serve a specific iconographic purpose (unlike the number of *manushi* Buddhas [Buddhas of the past, present and future], commonly evoked in Theravada Buddhism). Rather, it conveys a sense

of the multitude of Buddhas and the idea of the Buddha field evoked in *buddhanusmṛiti* (the practice of recalling the Buddha), which is importantly emphasized as 'an effective means for attaining birth in Sukhāvatī' in several Mahayana sutras (Halkias, 2013, p. 17). The iconography of a seated Buddha in meditation at this point in time would easily have conjured up an identification with Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, who resides in Sukhavati, the western paradise—the ultimate after-death destination to which many Buddhists aspire, especially in East Asian Pure Land Buddhism. Wishing to be reborn in Sukhavati is the major impetus behind the Amitabha cult. The historical evidence that can help explain how the Amitabha cult was practised by Buddhist communities in India is yet to be fully examined, but we can consider some evidence from the Himalayas.

Tibetan sources that are contemporary or near contemporary with these stone slabs suggest a close association between Amitabha and mortuary rites (Halkias, 2013, p. 28). In Nepal, we have art historical and textual evidence to suggest that Sukhavati was an important aspiration for Newar Buddhists by at least the 16th century (Kim, forthcoming 2021, p. 269, n. 45; Dhingra, 2019, pp. 137–39). The

Fig. 4a Detail of the stele in Figure 4 showing the donor couple



Fig. 4b Detail of the stele in Figure 4 showing a *vajracharya* and his female partner





Fig. 5 Ritual scene with a *vajracharya* and two female donors
India, probably Bihar, Bodhgaya, c. 11th century
Stone, 18.4 x 43 cm
National Museum, New Delhi (60.547)
(Photograph by the author)

continued popularity of Sukhavati-Lokeshvara, a unique form of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara that is centrally evoked in Newar Buddhist death rituals like *shraddha* (Lewis, 2004, pp. 252–53), also suggests a deep connection between Amitabha and dealing with the dead; the importance of Sukhavati, Amitabha's realm, is pronounced in the popularity of the thus-named bodhisattva. While the Himalayan Buddhist practices don't necessarily prove that a mortuary Amitabha cult was in practice in medieval South Asia, Nepal's geographical proximity to Indic Buddhist sites and the increased movement along the Buddhist network during the period of *phyi dar* (the second transmission of Buddhism to Tibet, in the

11th century) suggest that Himalayan records can provide a mirror to understand what must have been in practice in India during the 11th and 12th centuries. That these stone slabs were found at pilgrimage sites like Bodhgaya also lends support to their funerary connection given the practice of dealing with the dead at these sites through the construction of stupas (Schopen, 2005). If the Bodhgaya stone slab's mortuary association is tenable, it suggests that the women depicted here took charge in dealing with the deceased: they had the stupa/slab made and sponsored the ritual consecrating it. Looking assuredly out at the viewer, they are in control and command the scene.



Fig. 5a Detail of the slab in Figure 5 showing the two female donors

This 11th century portrayal of two women as active agents who sponsored a ritual in Bodhgaya raises the possibility of reading another duo of Buddhist women in an alternative light: two women who appear on the bottom register of a Chakrasamvara mandala from Nepal, now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figs 6 and 6a). Datable to the turn of the 12th century on stylistic grounds, this painting is a testament to the exceptional talent

of Newar artists in the art of painting. Iain Sinclair (2014) has convincingly argued that the painting represents a specific mandala of Chakrasamvara, Saptakshara or Seven-syllabled Chakrasamvara, based on the sadhana of Durjayachandra (act. early 11th century). He also discusses the portraits on the bottom register, calling particular attention to the shaven-headed and minimally dressed male ritualist on the bottom left and identifying him as a non-



Fig. 6 Chakrasamvara mandala
Nepal, c. 1100
Distemper on cloth,
67.3 x 50.2 cm
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art
Rogers Fund, 1995
(1995.233)



Fig. 6a Detail of the mandala in Figure 6 showing two women, possibly donors



Fig. 6b Detail of the mandala in Figure 6 showing a Buddhist master

celibate Newar monk 'starting up his early morning ritual' of 'performing tantric worship with his female partner or partners' (Sinclair, 2014, p. 223) (Fig. 6b). It is indeed likely that the male ritualist, dressed in a diaphanous white garment and with a shaven head, is a non-celibate Newar monk, as seen in other contemporary visual evidence, like the portrait of a Newar Buddhist master with his family discussed above (see Fig. 3). The tantric Buddhist context of the *paubha*'s main deities, Chakrasamvara in sexual embrace with his female partner, suggests that this practitioner must have gone through tantric initiation. The conjugal relationship between the man and two women as proposed by Sinclair is also likely. The chaste, well-dressed appearance of the women may not fit the picture of tantric consorts, but this may be how the domesticized tantric system worked in medieval South Asia (see Fig. 6a). Just as the man holds his right hand at his heart in a particular gesture, the second woman holds her left hand (or both hands) in front of her chest with her little finger out, the meaning of which remains elusive.

When seen in relation to the Bodhgaya slab (see Fig. 5), yet another possibility of interpretation may be entertained: that the women were the main sponsors of the ritual and the *paubha*. Whether or not they were conjugal partners of the man depicted here, their fine outfits composed of exquisite textiles and golden jewellery are consistent with

the exceptional quality of the artwork—they visibly display the wealth that might have enabled such a fine commemorative work of art. That women may have managed wealth is not out of the question, especially in Nepal, where even a Buddhist nun named Tejakaramati enjoyed revenues from a piece of land, according to an 11th century deed from the Rudravarna Mahavihara in Patan (Kölver and Śākya, 1985, pp. 190–92). The reason for commissioning a *paubha* of this specific Chakrasamvara mandala may relate to tantric initiation rituals; however, the connection of this mandala to funerary rituals remains an interesting possibility. In one 15th century example at least (LACMA, acc. no. M.73.2.1), a Chakrasamvara mandala *paubha* was prepared for a commemoration ceremony for a deceased *vajracharya* (Huntington and Bangdel, 2003, pp. 260–63). According to Todd Lewis (personal communication with the author), it is still a known practice for a Chakrasamvara funerary ritual to be performed for a deceased *vajracharya* if he had gone through *diksha*.

Ultimately, dealing with the dead is one of the most fundamental human concerns. Religion provides a series of rituals that manage the crisis of death, and tantric Buddhism is no exception. Many works of art were commissioned and used in rituals to serve the dead and their descendants. And in those difficult times, widows and female children

took care of business more often than not. Just as in today's Newar Buddhist communities a *guruju-ma* is the one who helps set everything up, making sure a ritual runs without hiccup—albeit never in the foreground or openly acknowledged—these women agents were rarely formally recognized. There remain many more stories to be told of women in action in medieval South Asia. A close look at the surviving archaeological and art historical evidence will undoubtedly lead to further discoveries of (extra)ordinary women managing wealth and taking charge during crisis.

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