

Dharma Protectors

A vital aspect of compassion is to protect the weak from evil and from harm. The grimacing, wrathful dharma-protectors found in tantric Buddhism embody the natural power of protection which is generated by a clear and peaceful mind. Sometimes its force is generated collectively, as monks and nuns pray for peace in the world and pray that those seeking genuine spirituality may find it, away from charlatans and all the spiritual materialism that the human mind can create. The power of the protectors is also invoked with respect to oneself, as one practises personal compassion and endeavours to develop a mature way of overcoming one's own psychological faults and weaknesses.

There are many levels of protection, from that of 'worldly' protectors to that of the wrathful emanations of Buddha. Each has a specific role to play. The worldly protectors are the transformation of local energies and nature forces into guardians of truth. In Europe of the past and Asia of the present day, the ethos of special trees, mountains or groves was personified into a local god, spirit or fairy. These were respected, sometimes revered, and played an important role in animist religions and indeed in the psyche of the local population. When Buddhism introduces itself into such lands, it chooses to live in harmony with such forces rather than to destroy them. Their force, however, is re-channelled, upgraded into a compassionate protection of the local area. Any malefic power they may wield must be removed.

Legion were the local spirits harnessed to the cause of wisdom and peace by Guru Padmasambhava as he moved through Nepal and Tibet. Those which could not be converted peaceably were subjugated by force. Prior to him, King Tsongtsen Gampo had in fact seen the whole land of Tibet in the shape of a supine ogress, and had subjugated her by building neutralising temples on geographic sites corresponding to her heart (the famous Jokhang temple at Lhasa), shoulders, hips, elbows, knees, hands and feet.

At the other end of the range, protectors like Mahakala are direct emanations of the Buddha's compassion. In one way, these protectors can be compared to the emergency services. No one would expect to have to extinguish their own fires, protect their neighbourhood from thieves, deal all alone with natural catastrophes or to treat themselves medically in case of accident. One dials for help. When calling upon the protectors, one is soliciting their help in extinguishing the fires of one's own

passions and anger, protecting the realm of virtue from thieving pride, avoiding the universal damage done by egocentricity and healing the wounds of past karma.

The power of the external worldly protectors is seen as very real. If even an unintelligent guard dog could be trained to protect a whole household, how much more could an intelligent local nature god be harnessed to the power of good. Internally, and on a much more profound level, the peaceful confidence born of regular meditation also has a protective aspect. It can spontaneously surge up to hold one back at times of weakness when jealousy, pride and anger want to drag one into mistake. On such occasions, it may bear a wrathful face, much as a caring parent may look angrily at a child and speak forcefully to stop it crawling too close to the fire. On the deepest level, the Buddha within each and every being can manifest itself in any form, peaceful or wrathful, in meditation or the imagination, to guide hesitant feet back on to the path of virtue.

The symbolism of the costumes worn by wrathful protectors and the implements they carry represent, in detail, the flaws in the human psyche which are to be vanquished. Garlands of fifty-one skulls represent the fifty-one prime mechanisms of the confused mind. Bodies crushed underfoot represent egotistic illusion trampled down by the power of wisdom. The reason for such savage imagery is simple. Evil that refuses to be tamed by peaceful means needs to be eradicated by force. If the force is terrifying enough, victory may even be gained without a fight. In the entourage of the mythical universal monarch (*chakravartin*), his Precious General is so awesome that never a battle need be fought: the enemies surrender at the mere sight of such an adversary!

Some commentators see the ferocious protectors of dharma as the result of some adulterous cultural mixing in the past, and doubt their relevance to 'pure' Buddhism. But this is to ignore the very mechanics of the mind as it frees itself from worldly chains. The peace and clarity found within meditation gives rise to an automatic disgust for all that generates worldly suffering, on one hand, and fosters a natural compassion for those still in the grip of such suffering, on the other. This leads to natural self-protection mechanisms which sever thoughts of anger or desire as soon as they arise in the meditator's mind and such is the very meaning of the knives and choppers of the dharma guardians. As uncompromising wisdom blazes in the meditator, every object of existence fuels its flames. This is the fiery halo. Driven by tireless care for other beings, the bodhisattva strives day and night to help them, overcoming every obstacle of sloth, indifference and impatience to accomplish the

task. This is guardians' unbridled energy.