

The Embodiment of Tārā in Prajñāpāramitā: A Way of Artistic Representation

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The principal characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism is the invocation of female Buddhas. . Prajñāpāramitā is the predominant deity who is the essence and the physical embodiment of perfect wisdom. She is also considered the "Mother of all Buddhas and the sentient beings" due to her limitless powers to heal the living beings. On the other hand, Tārā, the consort or the Shakti of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara also encompasses the same epithet in that she is believed to be the protector of all living beings, especially when they are in a difficult situation. In the South and East Asian Buddhist practice, both deities also have a well-established reputation as the perfect essence of compassion and are, hence, depicted through a variety of icons to which the devotees pay their respect. This particular understanding is sometimes confusing due to the fact that the ordinary people idealize Prajñāpāramitā and Tārā as synonyms for one female deity: either Prajñāpāramitā or Tārā. The notion has also been portrayed in the respective icons where both deities are represented through similar icons. The researcher of the present study therefore proposes to examine the relevant literature, canonical understanding and the descriptions given in silpa texts etc., that have made a significant impact in terms of their similarity in appearance through the medium of icons. The sutra literature pertaining to the two deities and other secondary sources along with the silpa texts have been discussed as the primary sources of this study. Research was also carried out using the icons selected from various locations: China, Japan, and Korea representing Prajñāpāramitā and Tārā, particularly in the context of Mahayana Buddhist practice. The icons selected from Sri Lanka will also be taken as samples to examine how this concept has evolved in the Southern Buddhist practice. The study revealed that the important characteristics of the two feminine aspects in East Asian Buddhism of her limitless powers have two derivations: whereas Prajñāpāramitā depicts her abilities as the embodiment of wisdom, which is the central aspect of the Buddhist doctrine, Tārā embodies similar powers due to her partner, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara who has the boundless skill to heal living beings. The particular incorporation has, therefore, provided an acceptable foundation for ordinary people to bestow them with similar epithets, and to represent them through similar icons.

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