

Female Buddha at Ukubahāḥ of Lalitpur resemble with Alchi Sum-tsek Monastery, Ladakh

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Abstract

In Buddhism, enlightenment is accessible to all, regardless of gender. In the highest teachings of Tantra, a unique aspect emerges: the existence of five female transcendental Buddha-s, known as the prajñā of Pañca Buddha. Alternatively, they are sometimes interpreted as the Pañca Buddha themselves in female form. One such set of goddesses has been discovered in Ukubahāḥ, a vihāra in the old city of Patan, Nepal. This article focuses on researching these previously underappreciated sculptures from Ukubahāḥ. It highlights striking similarities between the iconography of 9th century's Ukubahāḥ sculptures and 11th to 13th century murals at Alchi Monastery in Ladakh. Among the five Tārā-s, three identical depictions are identified in Alchi's Sum-tsek Monastery. For this study, a comparative analysis was conducted solely on the depictions from Ukubahāḥ in Nepal and the Sum-tsek monastery in Ladakh. The Female Buddha at Ukubahāḥ in Lalitpur resembles those at Alchi Sum-tsek Monastery, Ladakh.

Keywords: Alchi Murals, Female Buddha, Ukubahāḥ, Pañca Buddha, Tārā.

Introduction

In Mahayana and Vajrayana, the two main branches of Buddhism, the goddess Tārā holds a significant position. She is depicted in various roles, including as a female Bodhisattva, a female Buddha, and even as the Mother of Buddha-s (Beyer, 1973). Multiple forms of Tārā appear throughout South Asia, Tibet, China, and neighboring regions. Tārā is represented in various forms and media, such as stone, clay, metal, murals, and miniature paintings, dating from at least the 6th century CE. Her representation in art has continued to evolve ever since (Beyer, 1973, 87). This article focuses on identifying a set of early wooden sculptures found in the Kathmandu Valley as the Female Buddha, also known as Tārā. These carvings date back to the 7th to 9th century, contemporaneous with the Śālabhañjikā struts on the adjoining walls (Slusser & Jett, 2010). Upon observing these figures found in Ukubahāḥ, they are depicted with characteristics identical to male Buddha-s, such as similar hand and leg gestures, but with the addition of breasts, wider hips, and a female hairstyle. The article states that these five miniature figures found in Bahāḥ identifies as five different Tārā. Based on the author's understanding, there are no primary textual sources in Sanskrit and Tibetan literature. Therefore, a comparative method is employed in this study using images.

Methodology

Primary and secondary resources were consulted for the research. Field visits to Ukubahāḥ were conducted to study a set of female figures. Various books were consulted as secondary sources, and many textual and pictorial sources were used in the research. This article compares the iconography of unrecognized figures with those in the murals of Alchi Monastery; however, a field study could not be conducted this time. Thus, many publications regarding the Sum-tsek Monastery were consulted, along with numerous online photos of the murals in Alchi. Among these, this article primarily focuses on the female Vajradhātu maṇḍala found on the second floor of the Sum-tsek Monastery. Given certain limitations, a small-scale comparative analytical research design using available primary and secondary resources was conducted instead of an elaborate large-scale study.

Five Female Buddha-s

Goddess Tārā is the female version of the transcendental Buddhas. In Vajrayana, there is a concept of five Buddha families. This begins with the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, which is attributed to an earlier period, circa the 8th century (Okuyama, 1982). The *Guhyasamāja Tantra* mentions the Female Buddha-s; *dveṣarati* or Māmakī, Locanā as *moharati*, *rāgarati* or Pāṇḍarā, *vajrarati* or Vajradhāteśvarī, and *īrṣyārati* or Samaya Tārā.

Generally, among this set of five, except for Samaya Tārā, the consort of Amoghasiddhi, the other Tārās are typically not worshiped as principal deities. Locanā, Māmakī, Pāṇḍarā, and Vajradhāteśvarī have received inadequate attention because they lack individuality and active functions. They are essentially inert and subservient to the *Tathāgata*-s, serving iconographically as their female reflections. No specific *sādhana* or *maṇḍala* revolves around Locanā Tārā, Māmakī Tārā, Pāṇḍarā Tārā, and Vajradhāteśvarī Tārā. In collective texts such as *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpannayōgāvalī*, they appear in passive roles. They either embrace the *Tathāgata*-s or are represented singly in the intermediate directions of the *maṇḍala* (Ghosh, 1980). References to the five Tārā are rare even in these collective texts. The *Niṣpannayōgāvalī Maṇḍala* that mentions all five Tārā are the *Pindikramoktākshobhya-maṇḍala*, *Ṣaṭcakravartī-maṇḍala*, *Kālacakra-maṇḍala*, and *Tricatvāriṃśadātmaka Mañjuvajra-maṇḍala*. However, none of this iconography matches the icons from Ukubahāḥ.

Female Buddhas in *Dhalīnkava* of Ukubahāḥ

Locally known as Ukubahāḥ, Śivadeva Saṃskārīta Oṃkulī Rudravarṇa Mahāvihāra is a prominent *Nevāḥ*-style vihāra in Lalitpur, Nepal. Ukubahāḥ has many significant features, including its well-preserved bahāḥ architecture and art. This bahāḥ is among the oldest Buddhist sites in the Kathmandu Valley, dating to the 6th century CE (Ghosh, 1980). The bahāḥ was renovated in the 11th century by King Rudradeva. The esteemed architectural Historian Niels Gutschow observes that subsequent chronicles corroborate the date, but no specific documents extant predate the 12th century (Gutschow, 2011). Gutschow alludes to radiocarbon dating of certain roof struts and blind windows, indicating that they are features from the 9th century CE. The inward-facing roofs of the courtyard are

supported by unpainted corbels depicting Śālabhañjikā-s. Dowman (2020) characterizes these as "some of the most exceptional in the valley" and observes that "their allure is as potent as that of any feminine representation in Nepal Mandala." In this manner, these elements likely rank among the earliest wooden architectural features to survive in their original location in the Kathmandu Valley.

There are many carvings on the beams of the surrounding walls facing inward toward the Ukubahāḥ complex. Miniature wood carvings in *dhalinkava* surround the vihāra on all four sides, among which are carvings of various religious objects, scenes from different Jataka stories, and grass motifs. 'Dhalin' means beam, and 'kava' means space. Therefore, 'dhalinkava' refers to the space left by two beams, with an extra false beam added that features a face. *Dhalinkava* is an integral component of the cornice that divides the two stories of the temples or houses of the affluent in the Kathmandu Valley. Veteran scholar Shukra Sagar (2017) claims:

The Ukubahāḥ monastic complex has a maximum of those designs still preserved in their original state of carving. There are more than 400 different patterns and some mono-scenic narratives from Jataka stories carved on them.

Though Shukra Sagar and Mary Slusser were both aware of these, it remained a subject for further study. Upon detailed inspection, carvings of the five Buddha-s are found on the east wall. The sequence of the Pañca Buddha in *dhalinkava* starts at the southeast corner wall with Ratnasambhava, Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi, and Vairocana. Similarly, on the southern wall of the Bahāḥ are the figures of five female deities, each measuring approximately 4.73 inches.

Regarding the common iconographic features among these female Buddha-s or Tārā, all the goddesses sit on a lotus. They are ornamented with crown, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and belts. Their crowns are very simple in design. Earrings adorn both ears of the goddess. A necklace fits tightly around the neck. They have bracelets on their wrists only. Their waists are adorned with bejeweled belt. Their hair is styled in horizontal space buns. The upper halves of their bodies are depicted as undressed, while the presence of a lower garment is inferred from the curves and patches still faintly visible on Fig. 5 and Samaya Tārā (Fig. 9). Each figure has a nimbus in the background. These elegant figures hint at the skill of the artisan who carved them.

Regarding the presence of Tārā figures in monastery, Gleen H. Mullen and Jeff J. Watt (2003) state in their book *Female Buddha: Woman of Enlightenment in Tibetan Mystic Art*, "Similarly, the female potential for enlightenment is made clear in Tibetan Buddhist art by the large number of female Buddha images found in the temples and hermitages. These appear in the five primary racial colors, indicating that women of all races have an equal potential for enlightenment." Their point is equally applicable to Ukubahāḥ, outside the Tibetan context.

Female Buddha-s in Alchi *Sum-tsek* Monastery

Unbeknownst to most researchers until the 1980s, the monastic complex of Alchi, nestled in a picturesque valley in Ladakh, India, has miraculously preserved Buddhist wall paintings of unparalleled splendor. The renowned murals at Alchi are captivating; not only are they of great significance to the history of Tibetan culture, which is predominant in the region, but they also hold immense importance for the history of Kashmiri art (Pal & Fournier, 1983). The entire monastery is filled with beautiful murals created by unknown Kashmiri and Tibetan artists between the 11th and 13th centuries.

The artwork within the three-storied building, or *Sum-tsek*, dates back to the twelfth or early thirteenth centuries and is stylistically derived from the artistic traditions of Kashmir. These elements connect it to the Buddhist traditions prevalent in Northwest India and Kashmir, regions historically associated with the early development of Esoteric Buddhism (Leidy et al., 2006). On the second and third floors of *Sum-tsek* are five different *maṇḍala*-s: the *maṇḍala* of five Buddha represented in masculine form, the *maṇḍala* of *Mañjuśrī Dharmadhātumaṇḍala*, the *maṇḍala* of *Sakyamuni* as *Vairocana*, the *maṇḍala* of *Prajñāpāramitā* as *Vairocana Sarvavid*, and the *maṇḍala* of five Buddha represented in female manifestations (Fig. 11) (Snellgrove & Skorupski, 1977). For this article, the focus is on the latter *maṇḍala*, located on the northwest wall.

Just like the other *maṇḍala*-s on this floor, the *maṇḍala* of “Five Buddhas Represented in Female Manifestations” is also divided into a nine fold (3 x 3) square composition. This type of composition is also seen in the *maṇḍala* of the eight great Bodhisattva-s practiced in the diamond world tradition of Japan. In the *maṇḍala* of five Buddha represented in female manifestations center and four sides of the inner square is occupied by five goddesses, iconographically identical to their male version. Similarly, the goddesses of the four cardinal directions are namely Mamaki, Pāṇḍarā, and Samaya Tārā. The outer square contains the eight goddesses of the offerings and sixteen *Bodhisattvi*. This is identical to the depiction of the *maṇḍala* of five Buddha represented in masculine form on the southwest wall. Further, about the *maṇḍala* murals in *Sum-tsek* monastery can be studied from other sources.

Comparative Analysis of Female Buddhas of Ukubahāḥ and Alchi Sum-tsek Monastery



Fig. 1. Female Vairochana or Locana from *Ukubahāḥ*

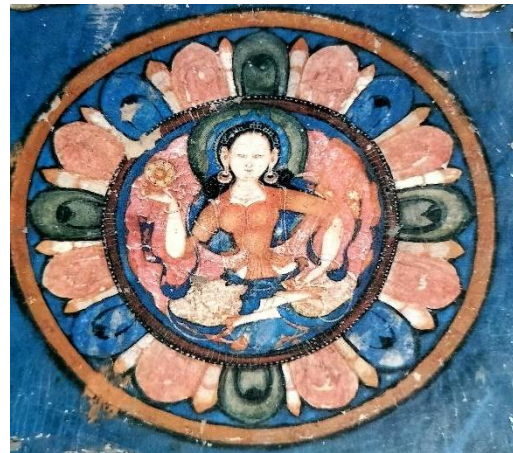


Fig. 2. Locana from Sum-tsek

Fig. 1 from *Ukubahāḥ* is seated in *vajraparyāṅka*. She sits on a five-petaled lotus. With her right hand, she uplifts the dharma cakra, and her left hand is in *tarjanī mudrā*, resting at the left side of her chest. Unlike the others in her set, her nimbus encircles only her head rather than her entire body. Her background is carved with a four-petaled flower on her right, and there is a vine of flowers to her left. A similar figure found in Sum-tsek Monastery is recognized as *Locanā*, according to Pratapaditya Pal (1983) in his book *A Buddhist Paradise: The Murals of Alchi* (Fig. 2).

From the maṇḍalas of “Five Buddhas Represented in Female Manifestations,” which is divided into a nine-fold square composition, there is a white goddess in the southeast corner. She is depicted in *vajraparyāṅka*. With her right hand, she uplifts the Dharma Cakra, and her left hand rests on the side of her lap with her palm facing upward. She is shown dressed on the upper half of her body, wearing a red dress with half sleeves (Fig. 2). Pratapaditya Pal labels her as *Locanā* in his book on Alchi. A fairly similar form is also found in the maṇḍala of five Buddha, represented in masculine appearance, depicted in the same room and on other Alchi monuments.



Fig. 3. Female Akshobhya from *Ukubahāḥ*



Fig. 4. Female Akshobhya from Sum-tsek

Fig. 3 from *Ukubahāḥ* is a female figure depicted in *vajraparyāṅka*. She resides on a five-petaled lotus. With her right hand, she performs the *bhūmiśparśa mudrā*, while her left hand rests at her side, holding a vajra firmly. The hand holding the vajra faces outward, toward the viewer. She has an almost circular nimbus, which features a layer with motifs of recurring patterns. Unlike in Fig. 5, 6 and 8, she does not have a second layer of nimbus containing dots.

Fig. 4 from *Sum-tsek* is a female Akshobhya. She resides on a light hollow on top of multicolored flowers. She has two elephants as her *Vahana*. *vajraparyāṅka* with her right hand, she performs the *bhūmiśparśa mudrā*. Her left hand is on the lap in *Samadhi Mudrā*.



Fig. 5. Female Ratnasambhava from *Ukubahāḥ*

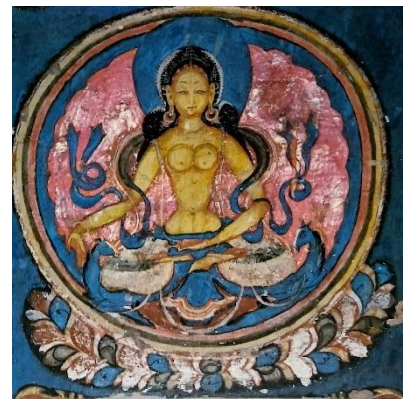


Fig. 6. Female Ratnasambhava from Sum-tsek

Fig. 5 depicts a figure in *vajraparyāṅka*. She sits on another five-petaled lotus. Extending her right hand, she displays *varada mudrā*, resting it on her right knee. Her left hand is in *dhyāna mudrā*, resting on her lap. In her left hand is a *piṇḍapātra*. She has a

circular nimbus with two layers behind her; the outer layer features some motifs, while the inner curve of the nimbus contains circular dots. Similar resemblance of this Ukubahāḥ figure is found in Alchi (Fig. 6.)

Fig. 6. depicts Ratnasambhava in the female aspect. This figure is in the southern direction from the central deity of the *maṇḍala*. She sits in *vajraparyāṅka* and resides on two horses that are on a lotus. She has her right hand in *varada mudrā* and her left hand on her lap. However, one notable iconographical difference is that in this mural, she lacks the *piṇḍapātra* present in the Ukubahāḥ example.



Fig. 7. Female Amitabha from Ukubahāḥ



Fig. 8. Female Amitabha from Sum-tsek

Fig. 7 depicts a goddess seated in *vajraparyāṅka*. She is seated on a seven-petaled lotus and is encircled by a nimbus shaped like the base of an egg, which contains two layers. The outer layer is decorated with some motifs, while the inner curve of the nimbus contains circular dots. Her hands are in *samādhi mudrā*, without an alms bowl. In the next paragraph, is the nearly identical iconography in the Alchi murals.

Fig. 8 is the female *Amitābha* from *Sum-tsek*. She is supported by two peacocks on a lotus. Her legs are positioned in *vajraparyāṅka*. This red figure has her two hands in *samādhi mudrā*, without a *piṇḍapātra*. Apart from the peacocks, this image is the closest iconographic match to Fig. 7, which is from Okubahā.



Fig. 9. Female Amoghsiddhi from Ukubahāḥ



Fig. 10. Female Amoghsiddhi from Sun-tsek



Fig. 11. Maṇḍala of five Buddhas represented in female appearance from Sum-tsek

Fig. 9 shows similarities to the above-mentioned details. She sits on a seven-petaled lotus. The nimbus around her body has two layers; the outer layer features some motifs, while the inner curve of the nimbus contains circular dots. Her right hand is in *abhaya mudrā*, a gesture of fearlessness, and her left hand is in *tarjanī mudrā*, with the index finger of her left hand straight while the other fingers remain bent. The *mudrā* is performed with her palm facing outward.

Fig. 10 is Amoghasiddhi in female form. She is depicted identical to the well-known masculine Amoghasiddhi form, legs in *vajraparyāṅka* and hand in *Abhaya Mudrā*. However, it has a female body.

Findings

Studying the miniature wooden figures, it is clear that the female goddesses of *dhalinkava* are the five Buddha in female emanations, also known as Tārā-s. Fig. 5 depicts the female Ratnasambhava, who holds the typical attribute of an ordained monk(?), the *piṇḍapātra*, supporting the identification as a Buddha. This is further corroborated by the Ratnasambhava from the *maṇḍala* of Sum-tsek (Fig. 6). Similarly, it was questionable whether Fig. 7 represented a female Buddha or a random meditating Yoginī. However, taking the Amitābha (Fig. 8) from the "Maṇḍala of Five Buddhas Represented in Female Manifestation" as a reference, it is certain that this figure is a female Amitābha and not an ordinary female meditator.

As for Fig. 3, this is clearly a female Akṣobhya, as she is depicted holding a vajra with one hand (whereas another one) in *bhūmisparśa mudrā*. *bhūmisparśa mudrā* is characteristic of Akṣobhya, and the vajra is his symbol (Bhattacharya, 2008). Locanā, or female Vairocana, can be recognized by her hand attribute, which is a Dharma Cakra, a symbol of the Vairocana family. Just as the vajra symbolizes Akṣobhya, the Dharma Cakra

symbolizes Vairocana among the *pañcakula*, or five families. Fig. 1 is further confirmed to be Locanā or female Vairochana by the Alchi *maṇḍala*.

Notably, there isn't much logic regarding Fig. 9, apart from the fact that she has a hand in *abhaya mudrā*, similar to that of Amoghasiddhi. The absence of a female Amoghasiddhi in the set of five makes it plausible that Fig. 9 is none other than female Amoghasiddhi.

It is noteworthy that, apart from female Vairocana, all other goddesses hold the same *mudrā*—i.e., hand gestures—as their male emanations with their right hands. For example, they exhibit *abhaya mudrā*, *bhūmisparśa mudrā*, *varada mudrā*, and *dhyāna mudrā*. Among them, the female versions of Amitābha's and Ratnasambhava's hand *mudrā*-s are identical to the male versions. However, further study shows that female Vairocana and female Amoghasiddhi, depicting *tarjanī mudrā* with their left hands, could be influenced by the 19th chapter of the *Niṣpannayōgāvalī*. Additional research is required to understand why female Vairocana and female Amoghasiddhi depict *tarjanī mudrā* with their left hands. Rather the less, among five figures from Ukubahāḥ, only three figures bear striking resemblance in Alchi.

Conclusion

The miniature wooden figures of goddesses in “*dhalin̄kava*” are, in fact, the five Buddhas in female emanations, also known as Tārā-s. This research has shown the linkage between Buddhist art in the Kathmandu Valley and the Alchi monastery in Ladakh, India. It has also brought to light the existence of a set of early wooden sculptures of Female Buddhas in Ukubahāḥ. It is recommended that further research be conducted on these figures and their relationship to Buddhist art and iconography in other parts of the world, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of female deities in Buddhism.

Many of the wooden artifacts from earlier centuries are now fragile. It is remarkable that these female Buddha statues are still intact, though some of them have been abraded or broken. As *Nevaḥ* Buddhist Bahāḥ-s serve as monasteries for householders, it is significant to have these types of female Buddha images. Furthermore, their extended connection to Alchi's prototypes indicates a cultural, spiritual, and intellectual exchange between these two regions. Much further research is required to elaborate on earlier images like these, which are at risk of losing their identities.

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