



Vajrayogini

In his oral commentary on Vajrayogini the great non-sectarian master Jamyang Khentse Wangpo, whose words were recorded by the Gelugpa writer Ngawang Damcho Gyatso, writes:

What are the different divisions of Vajrayogini? There is the secret Vajrayogini; that is none other than the primordial base-of-all of all sentient beings, the clear light mind that has been pure from the beginning. In interdependence with that, there is there is the inner Vajrayogini [taking the form of] a short A, or in this system a VAM syllable, in the middle of a triangular [matrix of] channel-knots at the navel. In dependence on this there is the co-emergent sambhogakaya Vajrayogini who abides in the Akanishta heaven, arising as an appearance of the outer nirvana and samsara. [Further,] there are the field-born nirmanakaya [vajrayoginis] that abide in the twenty-four, thirty-two etc. sacred places of Jambudvipa. [Finally], all the women who abide in various countries and locations are the karma-born dakinis.

General Characteristics



Vajrayogini/Vajravarahi ranks first and most important among the dakinis. She is the "Sarva-buddha-dakini" the Dakini Who is the Essence of all Buddhas. Although there are a number of visual representations of Vajrayogini, certain attributes are common to all: She is mostly shown as young, naked, and standing in a desirous or dancing posture. She holds a blood-filled skull cup in one hand and a curved knife (kartr or dri-gug) in the other. Often she wears a garland of human skulls or severed heads; has a khatvanga staff leaning against her shoulder; her usually wild hair flowing down her neck and back; her face in a semi-wrathful expression. Her radiant red body is ablaze with the heat of yogic fire and surrounded by the flames of wisdom.

Various Forms & Lineages

Varietals of Vajrayogini/Vajravarahi seem to be present in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, for example the Padmadakini/Yeshe Tsogyal in the Nyingma or the Khundrol-ma in the Bon tradition. Here we focus on the forms of Vajrayogini as practiced in the New Translation or Sarma School (= Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug traditions) of Tibetan Buddhism. These forms of Vajrayogini share the triple-OM mantra (with minor variations), are usually named Vajra-yogini or Vajra-varahi, and can be traced back to one of the Indian mahasiddhas who lived in the 10th and 11th century, or to one of the Tibetan translators of the Sarma School like Marpa.



Terminology

In a general context, Indian texts (and also modern authors) often do not seem to distinguish between the terms "Vajravarahi" (= Adamantine Yogini) and "Vajrayogini" (= Vajra Sow) using both names interchangeably. If used to indicate a specific deity, however, one has to differentiate. The iconography of Vajravarahi is based on a vision of Tilopa (928 - 1009 C.E.), called "*rDo-rje phag-mo*" in Tibetan; and Vajrayogini's on a vision of Naropa (956 - 1040 C.E.), Tilopa's disciple, called Naropa's Yogini (Tibetan: *Na-ro mkha'-spyod*). Naropa did not pass on this particular practice lineage to Marpa but instead to the Phamtingpa Brothers from Parping (Nepal) who passed it on to the Sakya tradition from where it came later to the Gelugpas. See

[Common Lineage](#)

Vajravarahi in the Kagyu Tradition



The various Kagyu lineages of Vajravarahi (often translated as "Vajrayogini") go back to Tilopa, Naropa, and Marpa. A number of modern Kagyu teachers, like Chogyam Trungpa and H.E. Garchen Rinpoche have stressed the importance of this practice.

The iconographical form is that of Vajravarahi. With a semi-wrathful expression on her face, she is red in color, has three eyes and dark yellow hair flowing upward, at the crown a boar's head. The right hand holds up a curved knife and the left a white skull cup at the heart. In the bend of the left elbow stands an upright khatvanga staff. She is adorned with a tiara of gold and five white skulls, green ribbons and gold and jewel earrings, a garland of fifty fresh heads, a garland of flowers, a bone necklace, girdle, bracelets and anklets, she wears a long green scarf around the shoulders. With the right leg raised in a dancing posture, the left presses on a sun disc atop a prone figure. Above a moon disc and pink lotus seat, she is completely surrounded by the tight curling flames of orange pristine awareness fire.

Vajrayogini in the Sakya Tradition



From the Phamtingpa Brothers the Vajrayogini (Tibetan: *Na-ro mkha'-spyod*) lineage quickly came to the great Sakya master Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092 - 1158 C.E.) who also received two other Vajradakini lineages derived (1) from Maitripa in the form of Maitri's Dakini (Tibetan: *Mai-tri mkha'-spyod*

) and (2) from Indrabhuti in the form of Vajravarahi or Indra's Dakini (Tibetan: *Indra mkha'-spyod*

). Although Naropa's Vajrayogini is the principal practice all three forms are still alive and part of the Thirteen Golden Dharmas of the Sakyas. Since all three dakinis are red in color they are also called the Three Red Ones (Tibetan:

dmar-mo skor-gsum

).

The Vajrayogini practice ranks most important and is very much alive in the Sakya tradition to this very day. Over the centuries there have been various expositions of this system, most prominently the Eleven Yogas of Vajrayogini by Jamyang Khyentse Wangchuk (1524 - 68 C.E.) who also wrote an extensive commentary on the practice. This commentary is the basis for the 7-day teachings given by the highest contemporary Sakya teachers like H.H. Sakya Trizin and H.E. Jetsun Kusho-la. During those teachings some participants are also introduced to additional, most secret practices not contained in the common sadhana. The Vajrayogini initiation is only given to aspirants who have been previously introduced to the Hevajra or Chakrasamvara mandala (= Highest Yoga Tantra initiations).

Vajrayogini in the Gelug Tradition

It is said that Vajrayogini was Je Tsonkhapa's (1357 - 1419 C.E.) innermost yidam. There is no evidence for this since the Gelugpas had paid attention to Vajrayogini/Vajravarahi only as the consort of Chakrasamvara being one of their three principal yidams (*gsang bde 'jigs gsum*; the others are Guhyasamaja and Vajrabhairava). To this very day, Vajrayogini is not part of the canonical teaching curriculums at the tantric colleges. Only as late as in 18th century the Sakya transmission of Naropa's Vajrayogini seems to have been introduced to the Gelug tradition. From then on the Gelug and Sakya Vajrayogini lineages are separate from each other.

It was Phabongkha Rinpoche (1878 - 1941 C.E.) who recommended and promoted the Vajrayogini practice as the main meditational deity of the Gelug tradition. The main disciples of Phabongkha Rinpoche, Trijang Rinpoche and Zong Rinpoche promoted the Vajrayogini practice further - especially among Western audiences. So did the next generation of lamas like Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa, Geshe Tharchin, Gehlek Rinpoche, just to name a few. Today the Vajrayogini practice has become very popular with teachers and students. Like in the Sakya tradition aspirants have to take a full Highest Yoga Tantra empowerment before they can receive the Vajrayogini initiation. Also Vajrayogini teachings (= commentaries on the practice) and retreats are often offered.

Reference

- Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses in India*, Princeton University Press: Princeton/Oxford, 2006.
- _____, *Passionate Enlightenment, Women in Tatric Buddhism*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1994.
- Alex Wayman, *The Buddhist Tantras, Light on Indo-Tibetan Esotericism*, Samuel Weiser: New York, 1973.
- Elizabeth English, *Vajrayogini, Her Visualizations, Rituals, and Forms*, Wisdom Publications: Boston, 2002.

- Glenn H. Mullin, *Female Buddhas, Women of Enlightenment in Tibetan Mystical Art*, Clear Light Books: Santa Fe, 2003.

- Rob Preece, *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra*, Snow Lion Publications: Ithaca, 2006.
- Martin Willson & Martin Brauen, *Deities of Tibetan Buddhism*, Wisdom Publications: Somerville, 2000.
- Georges B.J. Dreyfus, *The Shuk-den Affair: Origins of a Controversy*, Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies) (Vol., 21, no. 2 [1998]: 227?270; available for [downlo](#)
[ad](#)
from this website (w/ permission of the author).

