

Exploring Tibet ...

Information and Guide to Cultural Artifacts



South Asia Institute

**The University of
Texas
at
Austin**

Overview of Tibet

-from:

“Tibet at a Glance.” The Government of Tibet in Exile. 30 Sep 1996. 24 Jun 2008.
<<http://www.tibet.com/glance.html>>

Tibet lies at the centre of Asia, with an area of 2.5 million square kilometers. The earth's highest mountains, a vast arid plateau and great river valleys make up the physical homeland of 6 million Tibetans. It has an average altitude of 13,000 feet above sea level.

Tibet is comprised of the three provinces of Amdo (now split by China into the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu & Sichuan), Kham (largely incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Qinghai), and U-Tsang (which, together with western Kham, is today referred to by China as the Tibet Autonomous Region).

The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) comprises less than half of historic Tibet and was created by China in 1965 for administrative reasons. It is important to note that when Chinese officials and publications use the term "Tibet" they mean only the TAR.

Tibetans use the term Tibet to mean the three provinces described above, i.e., the area traditionally known as Tibet before the 1949-50 invasion.

Despite over 40 years of Chinese occupation of Tibet, the Tibetan people refuse to be conquered and subjugated by China. The present Chinese policy, a combination of demographic and economic manipulation, and discrimination, aims to suppress the Tibetan issue by changing the very character and the identity of Tibet and its people.

Today Tibetans are outnumbered by Han Chinese population in their own homeland.

Quick Facts

Capital City:	Lhasa
Population:	6 million Tibetans and an estimated 7.5 million Chinese, most of whom are in Kham and Amdo.
Geographic Size:	2.5 million sq. km.
Language:	Tibetan, though the official language is listed as Chinese.
Political and Religious leader:	The 14th Dalai Lama. In exile in Dharamsala, India.

Religion

Tibet is home to a distinctive type of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism developed in the first century CE as a sect with a more devotional approach to the Buddha and to beings called bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are beings who reach enlightenment as the Buddha did, but choose to continue dying and being reborn in order to help other beings who have not yet reached enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhists particularly revere the bodhisattvas associated with compassion such as Avalokiteshvara and Tara.

In Tibetan Buddhism, great importance is also held for scholars and teachers. The most senior monks are known as “lamas.” Lamas have typically mastered Tibetan Meditations and Rituals. These teachers are reborn to teach others to follow the Buddha’s eight-fold path to enlightenment.

Tibetan Buddhists incorporate practices that are known as “tantric.” Tantric Buddhism teaches that thoughts and emotions are part of what is called “the Buddha nature.” The Buddha nature is the potential of all beings to reach enlightenment. Tantric Buddhists aim to come to a greater understanding of the Buddha nature by using different forms of meditation and rituals such as learning to identify with one of the Cosmic Buddhas.

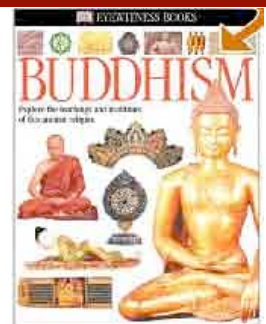
Wilkinson, Philip. [Buddhism: Explore the Teachings and Traditions of this Ancient Religion](#). New York: DK Publishing Inc, 2003.

1. Buddhism: Explore the Teachings and Traditions of this Ancient Religion

Here is an exciting and informative guide to Buddhist beliefs, practices, and culture. Beautiful artifacts, manuscripts, and photographs combine to tell the story of Buddha and his followers, and their influence around the world – providing a revealing “eyewitness” account of Buddhism. See: Buddha statues from many different countries, golden temples and shrines, Tibetan wall hangings, a sand mandala being made, the Dalai Lama’s palace.

Learn: about the many different strands of Buddhism, who Siddhata Gotama was, what “nibbana” means to Buddhists, what the Wheel of Life is, what the lotus flower symbolizes.

Discover: what the Four Noble Truths are, what happens during the Hana Matsuri festival, how Tibetan prayer wheels are used, what life is really like for Buddhist monks.



“Tara” -From:

"Tara." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 20 June 2008
<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9071258>>

Tara is the Buddhist saviour-goddess with numerous forms, widely popular in Nepal, Tibet, and Mongolia. She is the feminine counterpart of the bodhisattva (“Buddha-to-be”) Avalokitesvara. According to popular belief, she came into existence from a tear of Avalokitesvara, which fell to

the ground and formed a lake. Out of its waters rose up a lotus, which, on opening, revealed the goddess. Like Avalokitesvara, she is a compassionate, succouring deity who helps men “cross to the other shore.” She is the protectress of navigation and earthly travel, as well as of spiritual travel along the path to Enlightenment.



2. White Tara Statute

-from:

"Tara." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 20 June 2008

<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9071258>>

In Tibet, Tara is believed to be incarnate in every pious woman, and the two wives—a Chinese princess and a Nepali princess—of the first Buddhist king of Tibet, Srong-brtsan-sgam-po, were identified with the two major forms of Tara. The White Tara (Sanskrit: Sitatara; Tibetan: Sgrol-dkar) was incarnated as the Chinese princess. She symbolizes purity and is often represented standing at the right hand of her consort, Avalokitesvara, or seated with legs crossed, holding a full-blown lotus. She is generally shown with a third eye. Tara is also sometimes shown with eyes on the soles of her feet and the palms of her hands (then she is called “Tara of the Seven Eyes,” a form of the goddess popular in Mongolia).

3. Green Tara Statue

-from:

"Tara." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 20 June 2008

<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9071258>>

The Green Tara (Sanskrit: Syamatara; Tibetan: Sgrol-ljang) was believed to be incarnated as the Nepali princess. She is considered by some to be the original Tara and is the female consort or sexual partner of Avalokitesvara. She is generally shown seated on a lotus throne with right leg hanging down, wearing the ornaments of a bodhisattva and holding the closed blue lotus (utpala).



The white and green Taras, with their contrasting symbols of the full-blown and closed lotus, are said to symbolize between them the unending compassion of the deity who labours both day and night to relieve suffering. Under the influence of Tibetan Lamaism the different forms of Tara multiplied to a traditional 108. Tibetan temple banners frequently show 21 different Taras, coloured white, red, and yellow, grouped around a central green Tara. The figure of the “self-born” Buddha, Amitabha, is often shown in her headdress, as she, like Avalokitesvara, is considered to be an emanation of Amitabha.



4. Tibetan Temple Buddhist Bell and Vajra

-from:

“Vajra.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 20 June 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9074648>>.

The Vajra or “rdo-rje” (in Tibetan) is a five-pronged ritual object extensively employed in Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies. It is the symbol of the Vajrayana school of Buddhism.

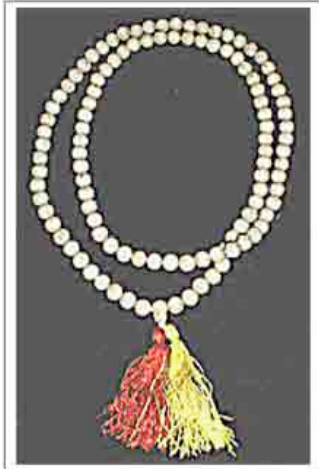
Vajra, in Sanskrit, has both the meanings of “thunderbolt” and “diamond.” Like the thunderbolt, the vajra cleaves through ignorance. The thunderbolt was originally the symbol of the Hindu rain god Indra (who became the Buddhist Sakra) and was employed by the 8th-century Tantric (esoteric) master Padmasambhava to conquer the non-Buddhist deities of Tibet. Like the diamond, the vajra destroys but is itself indestructible and is thus likened to sunya (the all-inclusive void).

The vajra is fashioned out of brass or bronze, the four prongs at each end curving around the central fifth to form a lotus-bud shape. A nine-pronged vajra is less commonly used. In ritual use the vajra is frequently employed in conjunction with the bell (Sanskrit ghanta; Tibetan dril bu), the various gestures (mudras), when correctly executed, having considerable metaphysical power. The vajra (symbolizing the male principle, fitness of action) is held in the right hand and the bell (symbolizing the female principle, intelligence) in the left hand, the interaction of the two ultimately leading to enlightenment. In art the vajra is an attribute of many divinities, such as the celestial Buddha Aksobhya and his manifestation as a bodhisattva (“Buddha-to-be”), Vajrapani (In Whose Hand Is the Vajra). The visva-vajra is a double vajra in the shape of a cross with four equal arms.

5. Tibetan Tingshas

Tingshas are an instrument used to focus and clear the mind before or after a teaching or meditation. To create a tone, hold the string midway and let the symbols fall together.





6. Lotus Seed Tibetan Prayer Beeds

-from:

Wilkinson, Philip. [Buddhism: Explore the Teachings and Traditions of this Ancient Religion](#). New York: DK Publishing Inc, 2003.

Many Tibetan Buddhists carry prayer beads to help them count the number of times they repeat a mantra on the Triple Refuge (Buddhist rituals of devotion to the Buddha, his teachings, and the monastic community). Most strings are made up of 108 beads, which is the number of desires that must be overcome before reaching enlightenment.

7. Tibetan Buddhist Prayer Flags

This is a traditional roll of 25 Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags from Kathmandu, Nepal. Prayer Flags are traditionally hung outside temples, at crossroads where many travelers pass, at holy places, atop mountain summits, anywhere that evil spirits need to be dispersed, or anywhere open to catch the wind and carry the prayers off. They create an atmosphere of peace, serenity, and hope.



The color of a prayer flag and the symbols printed on it create a prayer or offering that the wind distributes to the world each time it brushes against the flag. The Tibetan word for a horizontal prayer flag is Lung-ta, which translates literally as "wind horse." The prayers of a flag become a permanent part of the universe as the images fade from wind and sun. Just as life moves on and is replaced by new life, Tibetans renew their hopes for the world by continually mounting new flags alongside of the old.

Prayer Flags are typically related to Tibet and linked to Tibetan Buddhism, but their origin lies in the Tibetan pre-Buddhist tradition of Bön, just as the so-called Wind Horse, which is often found on them.

It is believed that the special blessing power of the printed mantras, prayers and auspicious symbols on them is spread all over the world by the wind. They decorate monasteries, houses and even mountain passes.

The Tibetan word for prayer flags is Lung-ta, literally "Wind horse". The central image is that of a horse bearing three flaming jewels on its back, representing the Tibetan Buddhist trinity. This is the triple refuge of Buddha, who is the enlightened one, Dharma, the path of Buddhist teachings, & Sangha, the Buddhist monastic community. The Wind horse is both the subduer of evil & the vehicle of enlightenment.



8. Kata or Silk Scarf

No Tibetan custom is as well known as the offering of a kata or white scarf in greeting. The kata is an auspicious symbol. It lends a positive note to the start of any enterprise or relationship and indicates the good intentions of the person offering it. Katas are offered to religious images, such as statues of the Buddha, and to lamas and government officials prior to requesting their help in the form of prayers or other

services. The offering of the kata indicates that the request is not marred by corrupt thoughts or ulterior motives.

“Katas or Silk Scarves.” The Government of Tibet in Exile. 3 Feb 1998. 24 Jun 2008.
<<http://www.tibet.com/Buddhism/katas.html>>

9. Tibetan Buddhist Wheel of Life Thangka Painting

Buddhists believe that beings exist as a part of a cycle of births and rebirths. This cycle is called “samsara.” The actions that each individual takes in his or her life (called “karma or kamma”) are the cause of the next life for that being. However, since Buddhists do not believe in an individual “self” or “soul,” The reborn being is related to the previous being only through the causation of his or her previous kamma.

The “Thangka” or “Wheel of Life” is the Buddhist illustration of samsara. The wheel is held in the mouth of the demon “impermanence” or “death.” The main six segments of the wheel represent the six different realms into which a being may be born. These realms are: gods, humans, animals, asuras (war-like demons), hungry spirits, and Hell. The twelve segments along the edge of the wheel depict karma in human life. Each of the figures stands for a different quality of kamma. For example, a blind man represents ignorance, and a man picking fruit represents desire and possession. The three animals depicted in the center of the wheel represent the three principal faults that the Buddha taught that people must overcome. Concerning these three faults - the cock represents greed, the snake represents hatred, and the pig represents ignorance.



*A master artisan in Nepal painted this thanka on a cotton canvas using natural pigments and real 24 kt. gold paint.

Wilkinson, Philip. [Buddhism: Explore the Teachings and Traditions of this Ancient Religion](#). New York: DK Publishing Inc, 2003.



10. “Om Mani Padme Hum” Mantra Bracelet

-from:

“Seed Mantra: Om Mani Padme Hum.” Buddhist Studies: Buddha Dharma Education Association and Buddhanet. 24 Jun 2008.

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/bud_om.htm>

Om Mani Padme Hum' (translation: 'Hail the jewel in the lotus') is a six syllable invocation (mantra) of Avlokitesvara, one who is invoked as the Protector from danger. It is claimed that one who recites this mantra will be saved from all dangers and will be protected. This mantra is widely used in Mahayana Buddhism. One can find this mantra inscribed on rocks, prayer wheels, stupa walls, loose stones heaped as Mani (jewels) on roads, paths, mountain passes, the approaches and exits of villages. One can find this Mantra inscribed outwardly in the prayer wheels with millions of this mantra inscribed on paper inside the prayer wheels. The devotee turning one round of the prayer wheel means he recites this mantra millions of times. As this mantra is thought to save one from all dangers, it is widely used in pendants, rings, etc.

Reading the syllables from left to right:



om	ma	ni	pad	me	hum
(ohm)	(mah)	(nee)	(pahd)	(may)	(hum)

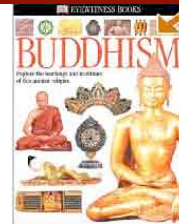
11. Tibetan Lantern

This paper lantern features images of several bodhisattvas. Pictured here is the many-headed Avalokiteshvara. He is known as the protector of the world.



Quick Artifact Reference Guide

1. Buddhism: Explore the Teachings and Traditions of this Ancient Religion



2. White Tara Statue



3. Green Tara Statue



4. Tibetan Temple Buddhist Bell and Vajra



5. Tibetan Tingshas



6. Lotus Seed Tibetan Prayer Beeds



7. Tibetan Buddhist Prayer Flags



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