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Ārya Tārā as an Archetype for Spiritual Caregivers

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ABSTRACT: Many metaphors have been used to describe Ārya Tārā. She has been called a guiding star, a seaworthy boat in turbulent waters, the wisdom of the moon, and the tear of the God of Compassion. She is both the mother of the Buddhas and the Queen of the Underworld. Because she is a Buddha, she is unaffected by the defects of cyclic existence (another term for *samsāra*, which represents realms of existence as well as mental states). With imperturbable intention, she has vowed to remain ever-present until all sentient beings have been freed from pain and suffering. She is renowned for her swift, heroic, dynamic, and equanimous salvific response to all who seek her aid. Like the Medicine Buddha, she is a great healer with the power to invoke any resource required to offer care and comfort. Lastly, recognizing the lack of inherency of all things, including gender, Tārā vowed to do all this in female form. Given all of Tārā's qualities, she is an inspiring archetype for spiritual caregivers. This paper will explore Tārā's legend, texts, and iconography as fodder for fundamental qualities for caregivers and attitudinal approaches to spiritual care.

In Vajrayāna Buddhism, deities are visualized during meditation to create a feeling of safety, to calm and purify the mind, and to help practitioners adopt virtuous qualities like generosity, patience, ethical conduct, diligence, concentration, and wisdom. Tārā is one of the most popular meditational deities among Tibetan practitioners and Vajrayāna followers all over the world. Many metaphors have been used to describe Ārya

Tārā. She has been called a guiding star, a seaworthy boat in turbulent waters, the wisdom of the moon, and the tear of the Bodhisattva³⁵ of Compassion. She is both the mother of the Buddhas and the Queen of the Underworld. Because she is a Buddha, she is unaffected by the defects of cyclic existence (another term for *saṃsāra*, which represents realms of existence as well as mental states). With imperturbable intention, she has vowed to remain ever-present until all sentient beings have been freed from pain and suffering. She is renowned for her swift, heroic, dynamic, and equanimous salvific response to all who seek her aid. She is a great healer with the power to invoke any resource required to offer care and comfort. Lastly, recognizing the lack of inherency of all things, including gender, Tārā has vowed to do all of this in female form. Given all of Tārā's qualities, she is an inspiring archetype for spiritual caregivers of all backgrounds. This paper will explore Tārā's legend, texts, and iconography as fodder for fundamental qualities for caregivers and attitudinal approaches to spiritual care.

Ārya Tārā has been the subject of a significant body of scholarship on South Asian and Himalayan Buddhist history, ritual, and meditative practice. Early academic publications on Tārā include *The Indian Buddhist Cult of Avalokita and His Consort Tārā 'the Saviouress* (Waddell, 1894), *The Origin and Cult of Tārā* (Shastri, 1925), *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa Et Tārāmūlakalpa* (Lalou, 1936) while more recent scholarship includes *The Tārā Tantra* (Landesman, 2020), *In Praise of Tārā: Songs to the Saviouress* (Wilson, 1992), *The Cult of Tārā, Magic*

³⁵ A Bodhisattva is an accomplished Buddhist practitioner whose altruistic intention is to become enlightened and save others from the pain and suffering of cyclic existence.

and Ritual in Tibet (Beyer, 1973), *Tārā: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha* (Wooten, 2020) and *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (Shaw, 2006).

The Legends of Ārya Tārā

Though there are numerous tales of Tārā's emergence, the two most prominent are the story of Princess Yeshe Dawa and the story of Avalokiteśvara's tears. In the *Story of Princess Yeshe Dawa (Wisdom Moon)*,³⁶ Tārā demonstrates wisdom:

In a time long ago, in a world called Manifold Light, there was a Princess called Yeshe Dawa or Wisdom Moon, a dedicated Buddhist practitioner who had progressed continuously along the path. Her accomplishments caught the attention of some young monks who asked, why don't you change your gender to male so you can reach enlightenment? If you switch your gender, I'm sure you could become enlightened immediately, they said. She wisely told the monks that all things were empty of inherent existence and, ultimately, there's no difference between self and other or male and female. Many people strive to become enlightened in a man's body, but not a single person strives for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman's body. So, I shall work to benefit all sentient beings but only in a woman's form for as long as *saṃsāra* exists. Not only did Yeshe Dawa become enlightened herself, but she became ĀryaTārā, "the Mother of all Buddhas."

³⁶ Rachael H. Wooten, *Tārā: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*. Boulder (CO.: Sounds True, 2020), 11.

In this story, Tārā is the Goddess of Wisdom, which means she has a direct realization of emptiness, the lack of inherency of all things. She understands that all phenomena are the results of causes and conditions, and when these causes and conditions change, so do phenomena. Nothing is permanent or stagnant, and all things are dynamic, which is especially true for the mind. Our thoughts, ideas, concepts, and emotions are dynamic and subject to change at any time. Sometimes, it happens slowly, but with each moment, our minds change, and our wisdom grows. Tārā knows that the roots of sustained wisdom grow slowly. You do not always see it on the surface, but it is burrowing deep within the recesses of our minds. Tārā, rooted in divine wisdom, is patient as we struggle and strive to reach her state.

In the *Story of Avalokiteśvara's Tears*,³⁷ Ārya Tārā does not hesitate to reduce suffering:

Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, made a vow to free all sentient beings from the lower realms of existence. He proclaimed, “If I should hesitate in this task for even a moment, then let me shatter into pieces.” With this enthusiastic vow, he went about freeing sentient beings. But just as quickly as he released them, the lower realms refilled with suffering beings. For just a second, he hesitated and gave up. In accord with his vow, Avalokiteśvara shattered into thousands of pieces. Out of compassion, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas picked up all of those pieces and put Avalokiteśvara back together again. After he was reassembled, he wept, and from his tear came a Lotus flower, and from the flower, Tārā appeared as a Buddha herself and the goddess of compassion. Tārā

³⁷ Wooten, *Tārā: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, 13.

then vowed to help Avalokiteśvara free all sentient beings and lead them to enlightenment.

Here, Ārya Tārā is a supreme Buddha and Goddess of Compassion. She is the divinity of the Bodhisattva of Compassion's tears. Tārā is the embodiment of liberating strength in moments of vulnerability. By virtue of her compassion, Tārā is regarded as the personification of motherly love.³⁸ Tārā is a perfect mother whose love for her children is unconditional and limitless. There are many stories of Tārā coming to the rescue of all beings, no matter how cruel, careless, selfish, or thoughtless. Her love is unconditional, unwavering, and equanimous. She loves the rich and the poor, the brilliant and the unintelligent, the generous and the stingy. She knows that these characteristics are superficial and temporary, so there is no need to discriminate and hold some people close and distance ourselves from others. All are welcome in Tārā's sacred space, and she is here for everyone.

In *Tārā's Tantra (Tārā-Mūla-Kalpa)*,³⁹ her "father," Avalokiteśvara, does most of the talking. Tārā does not speak. On top of that, to access Tārā, you have to call Avalokiteśvara as an intercessory. At first, I found this idea dumbfounding. How could a Goddess as wise, bold, and boundless as Tārā let her father speak for her? Then it dawned on me. Avalokiteśvara represents age-old, tried, and true compassion – a compassion that has been through hardships and never wavers. That level of compassion is palpable. It permeates the skin of beings and the

³⁸ Susan A. Landesman and Paul G. Hackett, eds., *The Tārā Tantra: Tārā's Fundamental Ritual Text Tārā-Mūla-Kalpa* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2020), 317.

³⁹ Wooten, *Tārā: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, 12.

air in between and does not require words as a medium to carry it. The Heart Sūtra (The Blessed Mother, The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom, or Bhagavatī Prajñā Pāramitā Hṛdaya)⁴⁰ is a fine example of the nonverbal communicative abilities of a Buddha in meditative silence. In the Heart Sūtra, Śākyamuni Buddha transmitted blessed insights to his key disciples, Śāriputra and Avalokiteśvara, without saying a word. They, in turn, shared those insights with the community of practitioners (referred to as noble sons and daughters). Ārya Tārā exhibits the same abilities as she radiates the sacred energy of compassionate intention that fosters healing and insight while she sits in meditative silence and listens with her whole being. Tārā's compassionate listening permeates the space and speaks through her silence.

In Ārya Tārā's legends, she is not only compassionate, but she balances that compassion with wisdom. In this way, she is known as the "Goddess of the Enlightened Activities." Not only is Ārya Tārā swift and heroic, but because she is omniscient, her actions are always the most prudent, wise, and efficient. In Sanskrit, the word *tārā* means "star" or "crossing" and is associated with nighttime maritime travel. Tārā's name reveals that she is a way-shower for those crossing treacherous waters in the dark (a synonym for the afflictive emotions and cognitive obscurations that keep us from realizing the joy of enlightenment). Tārā is a guiding light out of mental darkness. Practitioners are encouraged to call Tārā's name when any dark thoughts or emotions emerge (like depression, anger, fear, and confusion), and she will protect you from harm and safely guide

⁴⁰ Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho and Thupten Jinpa, *Essence of the Heart Sūtra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 78.

you into the light (mental states free of harmful or afflictive emotions).⁴¹ Whether you call on Tārā, God, the Universe, Mother Nature, a neighbor, a coworker, or a friend, the truth is that we are not alone in our suffering. Resources are always available to help us navigate difficult situations, though they may not reveal themselves until we call for help.

Tārā's Enlightened Body and Emanations

In iconography, Tārā's image is a visual representation of her salvific power. Rising out of the muck at the bottom of a pond (symbolic of the root mental afflictions) is a Lotus (representing purity from afflictions). On the Lotus is a moon disc (the light of spiritual liberation), and seated on the moon disc is Ārya Tārā. She is beautiful (a reflection of the inner beauty of spiritual enlightenment), adorned with exquisite jewels and precious silk wraps that billow around her, alluding to her swift movement, which is like the wind. Buddhas do not need adornment. Tārā's exquisite silk clothing and jewels showcase her perfect realization of treasured spiritual attainments (generosity, ethical discipline, patience, diligence, concentration, and wisdom).

Unlike most Buddhas, who are typically shown with both legs folded in the lotus position, Tārā sits with one leg bent close to her (displaying the wisdom she holds close) and one leg outstretched for ease of mobility, symbolizing her compassionate willingness to rapidly come to our aid. This is most apparent in the Request for Protection from the Eight

⁴¹ Afflictive emotions are emotions or thoughts that disturb the tranquility of the mind.

Dangers,⁴² written by the First Dalai Lama, which were both physical threats in ancient India and mental afflictions. *In Buddhist Goddesses of India*, Miranda Shaw writes, “His dramatic verses reveal the “inner” dangers to be no less terrifying than the external ones.”⁴³ Tārā faces the fears of sentient beings with the effortlessly bold laughter of a Buddha, the remnants of which settle into a knowing little smile on her beautifully tranquil face. Tārā’s wisdom and compassion mean She is prepared and fearlessly ready to take on any challenge. Tārā’s right hand is extended in the gesture of giving help and relief, and her left hand is at her heart with her thumb and ring finger joined with the other fingers straight. This gesture symbolizes taking refuge in the three jewels, which means to seek peace, comfort, and well-being in the Buddha (the teacher), the Dharma (the Buddha’s teachings), and the Saṅgha (more advanced practitioners who can offer guidance). She also holds a lotus flower in her hand, representing enlightened freedom from all afflictive thoughts and emotions.

In the praise, *Twenty-One Homages to Ārya Tārā* (see homage below), Green Tārā is the focal meditation Buddha, along with twenty-one other emanations. Tārā’s omnibenevolence is the first thing that stands out in the homage prayer. Hearing the woeful cries of all beings in every realm of existence, Green Tārā or one of her colorful emanations is ready and willing to help (see Thangka).⁴⁴ Each

⁴² The eight dangers are 1) The lion of conceit, 2) the elephant of ignorance, 3) the fire of anger, 4) the snake of jealousy, 5) the thieves of wrong views, 6) the chain of miserliness, 7) the flood of attachment, and 8) the demon of doubt.

⁴³ Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 319.

⁴⁴A *thangka* is a Tibetan visual representation on cloth, such as painting on cotton or silk appliqué, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or *maṅḍala*.

emanation is one of four colors: white, yellow, red, or blue/black. Each color symbolizes the nature of that emanations' enlightened activity:

- White symbolizes pacifying energy that stabilizes and calms.
- Yellow symbolizes increasing energy that supports the journey along the path and manifests the required internal and external resources needed for practice.
- Red symbolizes magnetizing energy that draws positive energy and phenomena.
- Blue/Black symbolizes destroying energy that removes obstacles and annihilates negativity.

In some emanations, she looks loving, calm, and peaceful. In others, she wears a wrathful frown, representing her fierce power and determination to take on the most difficult of challenges.

Tārā Emanation ⁴⁵	Homage ⁴⁶	Mantra ⁴⁷
Green Tārā	Oṃ, I prostrate to the noble transcendent liberator	Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Svāhā
1) Red Swift and	Homage to Tārā swift and fearless,	Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Tre

⁴⁵ Wooten, *Tārā: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, 252-267.

⁴⁶ Thubten Chodron, *Pearl of Wisdom: Buddhist Prayers & Practices II* (Newport, WA: Sravasti Abbey, 2014), 12-17.

⁴⁷ Wooten, *Tārā: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, 252-267.

Tārā Emanation ⁴⁵	Homage ⁴⁶	Mantra ⁴⁷
Courageous Tārā	With eyes like a flash of lightning, Lotus-born in an ocean of tears Of Chenrezig, three world's protector.	<i>Dhātu Vaśaṃ Kuru Soha</i>
2) Great White Soothing Tārā	Homage to you whose face is like One hundred autumn moons gathered And blazes with the dazzling light Of a thousand constellations.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Papaṃ Śintaṃ Kuru Soha</i>
3) Golden Tārā	Homage to you born from a gold-blue lotus, Hands adorned with lotus flowers, Essence of giving, effort and ethics, Patience, concentration, and wisdom	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Ayur Puṇye Puṣṭaṃ Kuru Soha</i>
4) Yellow All Victorious Tārā	Homage to you who crown all Buddhas Whose action subdues without limit Attained to every perfection, On you the bodhisattvas rely.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Ayur Jñāna Hrīḥ Bruṃ Soha</i>
5) Red Hum- Sounding Tārā	Homage to you whose Tuttare and hum	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Amuka</i>

Tārā Emanation ⁴⁵	Homage ⁴⁶	Mantra ⁴⁷
	Fill the realm of desire, form and space. You crush seven worlds beneath your feet And have power to call all forces	<i>Ākarṣchāyā Hrīḥ Soha</i>
6) Dark Red Victorious Tārā	Homage to you adored by Indra Angi, Brahmā, Vāyu, and Íśvara, Praised in song by hosts of spirits, Zombies, scent-eaters, and <i>yakṣas</i>	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Bhīganā Śatrum Utsa Traya Soha</i>
7) Black Tārā Who Destroys All Negativities	Homage to you whose tray and pey Destroy external wheels of magic. Right leg drawn in and left extended You blaze within a raging fire.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Vidyā Āvaraṇa Ye Bhye Phat Soha</i>
8) Dark Red Destroying Tārā	Homage to you who Ture destroys The great fears, the mighty demons With a wrathful frown on your lotus face, You slay all foes without exception	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Śatrum Māraya Phat Soha</i>

Tārā Emanation⁴⁵	Homage⁴⁶	Mantra⁴⁷
9) White Protecting Tārā with the Three Jewels Mudra	Homage to you beautifully adorned By the Three Jewels gesture at you heart, Your wheel shines in all directions With a whirling mass of light	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Mama Sarva Upa Tawe Bhye Rakṣā Rakṣā Soha</i>
10) Red Influential Tārā	Homage to you, radiant and joyful, Whose crown emits a garland of light You, by the laughter of Tuttāre, Conquer demons and lords of the world.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Māra Loka Vaśaṃ Kuru Soha</i>
11) Orange Poverty- Removing Tārā	Homage to you with power to invoke The assembly of local protectors. With your fierce frown and vibrating hum, You bring freedom from all poverty.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Bāsu Dhāri Soha</i>
12) Golden Good Luck Bringing Tārā	Homage to you with crescent moon crown, All your adornments dazzling bright. From your hair knot, Amitābha	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Maṅgala Siddhi Soha</i>

Tārā Emanation ⁴⁵	Homage ⁴⁶	Mantra ⁴⁷
	Shines eternal with great beams of light.	
13) Red Burning Tārā	Homage to you who dwells in a blazing wreath, Like the fire at the end of this age. Your right leg outstretched and left drawn in, Joy surrounds you who defeats hosts of foes.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Spho Traya Bas Min Kuru Soha</i>
14) Black Wrathful Tārā	Homage to you whose foot stamps the earth And whose palm strikes the ground by your side. With a wrathful glance and the letter hum, You subdue all of the seven stages	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Vajra Mahā Pāda Ye Bas Min Kuru Soha</i>
15) White Soothing Tārā	Homage to the blissful virtuous peaceful one, Object of practice, nirvana's peace, Perfectly endowed with <i>soha</i> and <i>oṃ</i> , Overcoming all the great evils	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Papaṃ Praśa Māna Ye Soha</i>
16) Red All Knowing Hum Tārā	Homage to you with joyous retinue; You subdue fully all enemies' forms	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Dharma Prajā</i>

Tārā Emanation ⁴⁵	Homage ⁴⁶	Mantra ⁴⁷
	The ten-letter mantra adorns the heart, And your knowledge -hum- gives liberation.	<i>Pari Śodha Ye Soha</i>
17) Saffron Tārā Who Moves the Three Worlds	Homage to Ture with stamping feet, Whose essence is the seed-letter hum. You cause Meru, Mandara, and Vindhya, And all three worlds to tremble and shake	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Chora Taṃ Bhāṇi Soha</i>
18) White Poison Removing Tārā	Homage to you who holds in your hand A moon like a celestial lake. Saying Tārā twice and the letter pey, You dispel all poisons without exception.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Nāga Viṣa Śītaṃ Kuru Soha</i>
19) White Tārā Who Removes All Suffering	Homage to you on whom the kings of gods, The gods themselves, and all spirits rely. Your armor radiates joy to all. You soothe conflicts and nightmares as well.	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarv Dūrvā Sovaṇī Mochanī Soha</i>
20) Orange Tārā Who Protects	Homage to you whose eyes, the sun and moon,	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Vidha</i>

Tārā Emanation ⁴⁵	Homage ⁴⁶	Mantra ⁴⁷
from All Illness	Radiate with pure brilliant light. Uttering Hara twice and Tuttare Dispels extremely fearful plaques	<i>Dhī Zora Praśa Mānaye Soha</i>
21) White Tārā Who Fulfills All Activity	Homage to you, adorned with three natures, Perfectly endowed with peaceful strength. You destroy demons, zombies, and yakshas. O Ture, most exalted and sublime!	<i>Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Sarva Siddhi Soha</i>

In a personal interview, Geshe Ngawang Phende stated: “Tārā is the whole package for healing disease (mental and physical). She has the power to remove obstacles, to cleanse our negative Karma and negative energies because she is the deity of enlightened activities.”⁴⁸ Tārā is skillfully resourceful.

Tārā’s Mantra

Turning to mantras, hers is one to bring about healing. A mantra is a word, syllable, or phrase with special meaning and healing power for those who recite it. Tārā’s Mantra “*Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture*

⁴⁸ Ngawang Phende. 2022 interviewed by Letesa Isler. Zoom Videoconference. March 30, 2022.

Soha,” in its simplest translation, means “I prostrate to the Liberator, Mother of all the Victorious Ones.” However, when you explore the meaning of each word, the freeing, healing properties of the mantra are revealed:

OM (or *AUM*) - the attainment of Tārā’s enlightened body, speech, and mind, a body and mind without afflictive thoughts or emotions.
Tāre - freeing the body and mind from the root affliction of ignorance and the suffering it causes.
Tuttāre - freedom from afflicted thoughts and emotions, harmful actions, the eight fears, and negative intentions.
Ture - freedom from all diseases - physical and mental.
Soha - “May this come about.”⁴⁹

Ārya Tārā’s alliterative mantra is rhythmically quick, phonetically representing her expeditious enlightened endeavors. It has a soothing quality, the combination of which is a calm, crisp clarity of mind and a vibration that resonates in and beyond the body. The sound of Tārā’s soothing mantra calms the central nervous system and quiets discursive thoughts. The vibration of the mantra is imbued with Tārā’s healing energy. Thus, the mantra can be an instrument of protection. In Tibet, the mantra is the audible simulacrum of the divine power, and in the coalescence of image and object, it becomes the divine power itself manifest and crystallized in sonic form.⁵⁰ What is revealed above is that turning to Tārā for

⁴⁹ Thubtenchodren.org, “The Long Green Tārā Sadhana with Guided Meditation,” March 19, 2005. August 9, 2025. <https://thubtenchodron.org/2009/10/Tārā-meditation-front-extended/>.

⁵⁰ Stephan V. Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet*, Hermeneutics: Studies in the History of Religions 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). 243

healing is an expedient source of refuge. Tārā and her mantra manifest a calm, safe place for healing.

Tārā as an Archetype for Spiritual Care

So, how can Tārā's theology be employed as a construct for pastoral or spiritual care? Tārā's great compassion and willingness to act for the welfare of all beings make her an ideal archetype for chaplains and spiritual caregivers. We do not have to be Buddhists or pray to Tārā to develop her archetypal strengths and enhance our capacity to care for others. Simply contemplating and mirroring her good qualities will help us recall the skills needed to competently and consistently show up to help others in their journey across treacherous waters to the shores of well-being.

Tārā's Theology possesses many applicable qualities, but here I would like to highlight eight that I believe are especially helpful to spiritual care:

- 1) Tārā is patient – Her patience is rooted in divine wisdom
- 2) Tārā knows tears are freeing – She is liberating strength in moments of vulnerability
- 3) Tārā is a compassionate listener – Her benevolence speaks when she does not
- 4) Tārā is here for everyone – Her love is unconditional and equanimous
- 5) Tārā is a guiding star – She is a light that leads out of mental darkness
- 6) Tārā is fierce – She is prepared and fearlessly ready to take on challenges
- 7) Tārā is the full toolkit – She is skillfully resourceful
- 8) Tārā manifests a calm, safe place for healing – she is wise, compassionate, and ethical

Tārā is Patient – her patience is rooted in divine wisdom. Entering a spiritual care engagement with someone is precious. It is based on mutual respect and trust. The interaction and the experience are completely interdependent. The chaplain and the person seeking pastoral care are coming together to co-create a nourishing, safe space that enriches them both. Shantideva opens the sixth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* with the following:

All the good works gathered in a thousand ages,
Such as deeds of generosity,
And offerings to the Blissful Ones (the Deities) –
A single flash of anger shatters them. [6.1]

No evil is there similar to anger,
No austerity to be compared with patience.
Steep yourself, therefore, in patience,
In various ways, insistently. [6.2]⁵¹

Here, Santideva is extolling the virtues of being able to withstand the hardship that a Bodhisattva will encounter while being of service to others and the merit lost in a single flash of anger. Chaplains often meet people when they are steeped in three sufferings of *saṃsāra*: the aging, sickness, and death of a loved one or their own aging, sickness, and impending death. In those times, afflictive thoughts and emotions can arise with a vengeance, but their afflictive emotions and the negative behaviors they exhibit are not inherent. They are temporary, and when the situation (the cause or condition) changes, so will their behavior. On the other hand, sometimes afflictive

⁵¹ Santideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva: A Translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra*, (The Padmakara Translation Group, 2011), 116.

thoughts can be very stubborn. They have been planted for a long time and have very deep roots. When care seekers begin to uproot them, afflictions struggle to survive, and spiritual care seekers might act in ways that appear cynical, condescending, manipulative, and angry. At those times, we have to remember that all the work that we have built to create a safe space for spiritual healing can be completely dashed by meeting their anger and afflictive behaviors with our own. I am not suggesting that the appearance of anger or other afflictive behaviors cannot be used as a tool.

On the contrary, in some cases, it might be very effective, but it should be the appearance of anger or other afflictive behaviors and not their actual manifestation. For these behavioral tools to be effective, the chaplain must have strong judgment and situational assessment skills or a well-established relationship with the care seeker. That said, the occasions when the use of the appearance of anger is helpful are infrequent. In all situations, chaplains should be steeped in patience and forbearance born from compassionate wisdom.

Tārā knows tears are freeing – she is liberating strength in moments of vulnerability. When we are met with suffering, a quiet secret is revealed – something that we intuitively know but are reticent to acknowledge. We, like the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, can feel the pain of others because we are interdependent. Our natural inclination may be to shield ourselves from others' pain because it has the revelatory power to unveil our own and any layers of shame we have snugly wrapped it in. Working with others in spaces of our own vulnerability offers us an opportunity to heal ourselves by helping others. Shared experiences help us realize that we are

not alone in our pain. Avalokiteśvara's tear-soaked vulnerabilities gave rise to new emanations of resourcefulness in the form of Tārā.⁵² There is strength and resilience in shared tears.

Tārā is a compassionate listener - her benevolence speaks when she does not. Listening is a full-bodied act of generosity. Listening requires quieting our busy minds to offer someone else the gift of undivided attention. Listening does not just involve listening to what is said. It is the discipline of concentration married to the art of observation. It is watching with a heart and mind that is lovingly alert, open, and curious. Listening requires that we internalize what is being said and how it is being expressed through word choice, voice tonality, physical posture, and facial and gestural expressions. Is the care seeker tense or relaxed? Is their breathing slow or rapid, even or staggered? Where are they placing their gaze, and what are their eye movements? Is their posture forward or backward, slumped or upright? The body often reveals more than the story that is being told. While we observe and listen to others, we also have to be aware of our thoughts and hold our compassionate intentions firmly, which will inform and shape our physical expressions. Speakers and listeners are always in the interplay of energy exchange. Awareness of this allows caregivers to co-create a safe space with care seekers for whatever manifests.

Tārā is here for everyone – Her love is unconditional, unwavering, and equanimous. We all have biases. Some are so

⁵² In the story of Avalokiteśvara, Tārā emanates from his eye, and her sister Bhṛkuṭī emerges from his right. They both vow to help him save sentient beings. Over time, Tārā grows in popularity, and Bhṛkuṭī becomes one of the twenty-one emanations of Tārā.

deeply ingrained that we do not even know they exist. All we know is that some people make us uncomfortable, and with others, we feel at ease. It could be their skin color, financial status, gender identity, an act they have committed, or a myriad of other characteristics. Sometimes, the intersectionality of many characteristics causes a feeling of distance. At the core of discomfort is the fundamental thought that some people are inherently different or “other” in a way that feels threatening. Of course, the Buddha taught that this thought is fictitious. None of the characteristics we believe make us different from “others” are inherent. They are all merely labels – transsexual, rich, criminal, black, and suburbanite are all labels and are all subject to changing causes and conditions. As Pamela Ayo Yetunde writes, “In ancient Vedic thought,⁵³ the inescapable network is called Indra’s Net. The imagery is of a net that spans the universe, and each node within the net is a jewel that reflects all the other jewels. It is a metaphor for the way that all of life is interconnected – we are mirrors, diamonds, and pearls in this flowing, universal net. This recognition (of interdependence or the fallacy of an inherent other) is part of the process of “casting” the net by expanding our consciousness and heart’s capacity toward radical inclusivity.”⁵⁴ So do not let the labels obscure the jewels. Meet each person with a big-hearted mind by letting the label rest in the corner of the room and out of the way of our unconditional compassion.

Tārā is a guiding star – a light that leads out of mental darkness. As pastoral caregivers, we aim to accompany the care

⁵³ The concept of Indra’s Net was inherited by Buddhist from Vedic thought.

⁵⁴ Pamela Ayo Yetunde, Resmaa Menakem and Eboo Patel, *Casting Indra’s Net Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community* (New York: Shamhala, 2023), 3.

seeker on their voyage with compassionate, healing intent while not grasping at outcomes. We must trust the process. However, sometimes, care seekers can get lost in the dark ocean of their experiences and do not seem to be able to find a way out. In these situations, shining a light on their intuitive insights and wisdom can bring clarity and meaning to the murky waters of confusion. Founded in the full-bodied listening described above, we can use reflective listening skills like open-ended questions, reframing, reflection, and summarizing to validate the accuracy of what we have heard and guide the care seeker to recognize their agency and sagacity. Should we find ourselves in a caregiving situation that feels overwhelming, we, too, can seek the guidance needed to shore up the resilience needed to guide others.

Tārā is fierce – Tārā is prepared and fearlessly ready to take on challenges. In *The Homage to Twenty-One Tārās*, one of her forms is Black Wrathful Tārā.⁵⁵ She has a gaping mouth that reveals sharp, snarling teeth. Her brow is furrowed, and she stomps and pounds the ground with open palms. Her wrathful energy is directed not at other beings but at the afflictive thoughts and emotions that cause us pain. Her fierce intention is to free all beings from their suffering.

Pastoral care is not for the faint of heart. It entails coming face to face with the suffering that most would choose to avoid. Grounded in courage, prepared by our diligent study, and wielding the weapon of daily spiritual practice, we cut through the inherency of horror. With unshakable effort and stillness,

⁵⁵ Thubtenchodren.org “The Long Green Tārā Sādhana with Guided Meditation” March 19, 2005. August 9, 2024. <https://thubtenchodron.org/2009/10/Tārā-meditation-front-extended/>.

we actively listen to stories that most would prefer to turn away from. We enter the hell of care seekers' greatest fears and soothe them as we journey through the flames and face the demons together.

Tārā is the full toolkit – She is skillfully resourceful. All care seekers are different. Although there are models and skills we can learn as caregivers that make us more proficient, our richest and most boundless resource is our spiritual practice. It increases our sensitivity to others and allows us to be more relaxed and creative in our discussions and modes of care. Our practice allows us to stay grounded while we think outside of the box.

Our practice feeds our ability to emanate from multiple aspects of our authentic personalities while not grasping at any of them. We all play different roles, readily transitioning from one to another without much thought. One woman can be a loving mother, a teacher, a wife, a meal preparer, a maid, a religious practitioner, a volunteer, a belly dancer, a football fan, and a snarling bear when her children are threatened. The same capability can be used to build rapport, trust, appreciation, and respect for care seekers. We all have at least twenty-one authentic emanations, all compassionately “at the ready” to be called upon for service.

Tārā manifests a calm, safe place for healing – she is wise, compassionate, and ethical. The foundation of spiritual care is safety. It is the cornerstone of Trauma Informed Care (TIC) and the ground floor of what care seekers should expect from caregivers. It requires creating a sacred space where the morally abhorrent can be explored without judgment,

recrimination, or shame. Undergirding safety is ethical discipline. Care seekers come to us when they are vulnerable, which creates an imbalance of power that can easily be abused. By behaving ethically, we draw boundaries of speech and behavior that keep care seekers and caregivers emotionally and physically safe. From this place of safety, we can establish a compassionate presence that supports care seekers as they make meaning out of painful experiences and integrate them into the stories of their lives.

Putting the Ārya Tārā Model into Practice

It was Saturday, October 22, and my first night on the Care Line. I had been training with a small group of volunteers and a half dozen CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) students. We had completed most of the training except for the pastoral care class. The director of the care line ended our first training night by saying, “It’s a good idea to have a spiritual preparation ritual before you begin to take calls and a clearing ritual after your shift is over.” I followed his advice by envisioning Ārya Tārā and all her good qualities as I said her mantra. This ritual is a centering, relaxing reminder to release expectations and be in the moment with whatever is said. Connecting with my “Ārya Tārā heart” quiets my self-obsessed thoughts and compels me to listen to others with her healing energy and intention. As a result, I was not feeling particularly nervous about the first night on the line. I was on the early shift, which runs from 8:00 PM to midnight.

I spoke to many callers that night, most of whom were regular clients of the care line, but there was one man whose call stood out for me. The man, let’s call him Joe, for simplicity’s sake, was drunk. His speech was slurred, and he spoke very

quietly because he did not want to wake up his wife or have his stepson overhear our conversation. Joe was a 37-year-old knife maker from Florida and was not having a good day. I know this because he started the call by saying, "I'm not sure how to start this conversation. I've never called one of these lines before." I said, "I know it can be a little awkward, but maybe you can tell me about your day." His response was, "I'm not having a good day. I think my wife is going to leave me." He then explained that with the pandemic, the sales of his custom-made knives had slowed so much that he had to close the business. This circumstance meant that his wife, a teacher, was supporting the family on her income alone. He felt so ashamed about this situation that he began drinking, and he and his wife fought a lot. His stepson would often insert himself in the fights to defend his mother. Joe felt incredibly disrespected by his stepson and struggled with being unemployed and not fulfilling his role as the breadwinner in the house.

As he spoke, I listened quietly. I could feel his shame and the devastating effect the pandemic and the loss of his business had had on his sense of self. I thought, I bet he was a fantastic artist. He has no idea, but I have a secret guilty pleasure. I love the show *Forged in Fire* on the History Channel. It is a knife and sword-making contest for blacksmiths. I am always in awe of the smiths who work under such dangerous and challenging conditions with temperamental materials to make these beautiful and functional knives. My compassion for him grew stronger. He then said, "I feel strange telling you all of this. I'm really a mess, and you sound so perfect." I immediately said, "OH NO! I'm perfectly imperfect, just like everyone else. We all have stuff, and I'm no different." He breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Oh good." I was pleased that he felt more comfortable. I

thought he was beginning to feel a little subconscious because his worries flowed out of him like a river, once he started talking. I think he was a bit shocked by how much he shared and felt the need to distance himself from me by creating the duality of “people like him” vs. “perfect people like me.” I shattered that fake duality immediately.

He then explained that he had looked for a job but could not find anything and was depressed. He repeated the issues with his wife and his stepson about three times. He was ruminating, trying to find a solution for his situation. I, of course, did not have any answers to his problems. Then he said, “I don’t know how to fix this.” I said, “It sounds like you are at a crossroads, trying to figure out what’s next.” He said, “Yes, with work and my marriage.” I asked him if there was anything that made him feel happy and at peace. He said very definitively, “Being out in nature... hiking, hunting, and fishing.” I asked him if he had done any of those things lately. Sometimes, answers to our questions come when we are relaxed and doing something we enjoy. Although money might be tight for him, Mother Nature holds soothing therapy sessions daily and does not charge a dime. He said no, “It’s so hot here in Florida...too hot to go out.” I said, “Really... the mornings and evenings are usually very comfortable, especially this time of year.” He paused a bit, and I could almost hear the silent “Dang” in his mind. “Sounds like you’ve lived in Florida,” he said. I said yes, I have, and this time of year is a great time to be outdoors.

As our time began to draw to a close (our sessions with clients are limited to 20 minutes), I asked him if we would like to continue talking or if he would like a short prayer or meditation. He said, “I’m not religious. I believe in a higher

power but don't believe in organized religion," he said. "My Catholic upbringing had turned me off to religion. I'm more spiritual." I said I understood. Then he said, "But I'll take a prayer, though." Surprised, I said, "ok!" Then, he asked what prayer I was going to pray, and I told him that instead of reciting a traditional prayer, I'd pray a custom prayer just for him. I prayed that the divine would bless his relationship with his wife, bring peace between him and his stepson, and give him the clarity he needed to figure out the most prudent path forward. He thanked me for the prayer, and we said goodbye.

Before the night began, I vowed to offer every caller a short prayer or meditation. I expected to be turned down more often than not, but everyone had taken me up on it thus far. I honestly expected that he would be the first caller to reject, but as it turns out, *everyone* took me up on the offer. Some chose a prayer, others meditation, but yearning for peace, everyone chose to quiet and center themselves before ending the call.

At the end of the shift, I visualized Ārya Tārā and said her mantra, feeling grateful for her wisdom, compassion, and guiding presence during my very first chaplaincy experience.

Conclusion

Although this was my first opportunity to offer spiritual care, by reflecting on Ārya Tārā's good qualities and envisioning them as my own, I was confident that I would be able to manage any situation that arose (Tārā is Fierce – She is prepared and fearlessly ready to take on challenges). Embodying Tārā, I held a safe space for all of the callers that night instead of being nervous, an energetic product of self-centeredness. Joe was very intoxicated, slurring and whispering to avoid waking his

family. Instead of asking him to speak more clearly, I quieted myself, concentrated, and gave him undivided attention and intention (Tārā is a compassionate listener – Her benevolence speaks when she does not) and accepted him just as he was (Tārā is here for everyone – Her love is unconditional and equanimous). I resonated with his vulnerability as a first-time caller to the Care Line because it mirrored my vulnerability as a first-time caregiver (Tārā knows tears are freeing – She is a liberating strength in moments of vulnerability). We would get through our “firsts” together. Though Joe did not know it, I immediately appreciated his knife-making skill, an artistic interest that few people who know me would ever guess I had. With a little resourcefulness, it is not hard to recognize commonalities and the interconnectedness we share with those seeking our care. Our spiritual practice reminds us of our interdependence, which leads to the destruction of fallacious ideas of the definitive self and the unrelatable other. With my distancing behaviors in check, I could quickly invalidate Joe’s when he began to distance himself based on a false perception of perfection. (Tārā is the full toolkit – She is skillfully resourceful). As Joe repeatedly ruminated about his marriage, his stepson, and limited job prospects, I listened patiently, only speaking once to offer a reflective statement. He needed time to air his troubles and process his emotions in a safe space. (Tārā is patient – Her patience is rooted in divine wisdom). Joe seemed to leverage alcohol to calm his central nervous system, but I wondered if there were more constructive solutions that would offer the calm and clarity he sought. When asked about activities that brought him joy, he responded quickly but then immediately dismissed the viability of those options, using the weather as an excuse. Though I had not had very much time to build rapport, I felt comfortable challenging the pushback on

actually doing the things he loved to do, all of which were inexpensive to execute. Mother Nature’s healing embrace is free. We ended with a prayer for all of the parties involved and closed the call with a divine request for clarity and a prudent path forward. (Tārā is a guiding star – She is a light that leads out of darkness).

Cheryl A. Giles writes, “When we give compassionate care, willingly and without reservation, we are helping, and the simple act of reaching out to another human being in need with kindness and love is a small step closer to healing the world.”⁵⁶ May we all attain Ārya Tārā’s good qualities for the sake of all sentient beings!

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Fig. 1.1: *Green Tārā*. 2024. Digital Thangka.



Fig. 1.2: *Black Wrathful Tārā*. 2024. Himalyan Art Resources.



Fig. 1.3: *White Tārā*. 2024. Himalyan Art Resource