Principal Figures of Tibetan Buddhist Iconography

A concise reference to 45 prominent Buddhas, bodhisattvas, primordial figures, tantric deities, dakinis and Dharma protectors

Forty-five prominent figures in five theological and functional categories, with Padmasambhava treated separately. Entries identify names, attributes, affiliations, manifestations and consorts.

Appearance: P = peaceful; S = semi-peaceful / semi-wrathful; W = wrathful. Labels describe principal forms.

Names: Sanskrit before familiar Tibetan names; — denotes no standard consort in the depicted form.

1. Buddhas: Primordial, Dhyani and Other

Primordial Buddhas and Shakyamuni

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
1. Samantabhadra Buddha Kuntuzangpo	P. Dark blue, naked, unornamented; primordial awareness and ultimate nature of mind.	Primordial Buddha (Ādi-Buddha); Dharmakāya; Nyingma/Dzogchen. Distinct from Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.	Samantabhadrī (Kuntuzangmo), usually white.
2. Vajradhara Dorje Chang	P. Dark blue, crowned; crossed vajra and bell; inseparability of method and wisdom.	Primordial Buddha; especially Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug tantric lineages. Doctrinally related to Samantabhadra Buddha, but iconographically distinct.	Bhagavānī in some union depictions; varies by system.
3. Shakyamuni Buddha Śākyamuni; Sangye Shakya Thubpa; Siddhārtha Gautama	P. Golden, monastic robes, earth-touching mudrā, begging bowl; enlightenment and liberation.	Historical Buddha; Nirmāṇakāya; teacher of the present Buddhist dispensation.	—

The Five Tathāgatas: Dhyani or Wisdom Buddhas

Buddha	Family	Direction	Wisdom
Vairocana	Buddha/Tathāgata	Centre	Dharmadhātu
Akṣobhya	Vajra	East	Mirror-like
Ratnasambhava	Ratna/Jewel	South	Equality
Amitābha	Padma/Lotus	West	Discriminating
Amoghasiddhi	Karma/Action	North	All-accomplishing

A widely used five-Buddha mandala arrangement; correspondences vary in some tantric systems.

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
4. Vairocana Vairochana; Nampar Nang-dzé	P. White; Dharma-wheel teaching gesture; all-pervading enlightenment, purification of ignorance.	Dhyani Buddha; Buddha family; centre; Dharmadhātu wisdom.	Dhātvīśvarī (Ākāśad-hātvīśvarī).
5. Akṣobhya Akshobhya; Mikyöpa	P. Blue; earth-touching mudrā, sometimes vajra; immovability, mirror-like wisdom.	Dhyani Buddha; Vajra family; east. Associated with Vajrasattva; Akṣobhyavajra is a related Guhyasamāja tantric manifestation.	Buddhalocanā (Locanā).
6. Ratnasambhava Rinchen Jungné	P. Yellow/gold; generosity mudrā, jewel; equality and abundance.	Dhyani Buddha; Ratna family; south; wisdom of equality.	Māmakī.
7. Amitābha Öpamé; Buddha of Infinite Light	P. Red; meditation mudrā, bowl or lotus; infinite light, discriminating wisdom.	Dhyani Buddha; Padma family; west; Sukhāvatī Pure Land. Associated with Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava.	Pāṇḍaravāsinī (Pāṇḍarā).
8. Amoghasiddhi Dönyö Drubpa	P. Green; fearlessness mudrā, double vajra; enlightened action.	Dhyani Buddha; Karma family; north; all-accomplishing wisdom.	Samayatārā, identified with Green Tara in the five-mother system.

Other Principal Buddhas

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
9. Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru; Sangye Menla	P. Lapis-blue; myrobalan plant, medicine bowl; healing and purification.	Principal Buddha of the Medicine Buddha mandala and associated Buddha groups.	—

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
10. Amitāyus Tsepakmé; Buddha of Infinite Life	P. Red, crowned; nectar vase; longevity and vital energy.	Longevity manifestation of Amitābha; one of the Three Long-Life Deities.	—
11. Vajrasattva Dorje Sempa	P. White; vajra at heart, bell at hip; purification of obscurations and tantric commitments.	Purification Buddha/yidam; associated with Akṣobhya and the Vajra family; also has wrathful forms.	Vajragarvī (varies by ritual cycle).

2. Principal Bodhisattvas

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
12. Avalokiteśvara Chenrezig; Lokeśvara; Lokanātha	P. Compassion; often white, four arms, lotus and jewel; also eleven-headed, thousand-armed.	Great Bodhisattva of Compassion; Padma family; associated with Amitābha. Hayagrīva is a wrathful emanation.	Varies; Vajravārāhī in particular tantric forms.
13. Mañjuśrī Manjushri; Jampelyang	P. Orange/yellow; flaming sword, wisdom scripture on lotus.	Great Bodhisattva of Wisdom; tantric manifestations include Yamāntaka/Vajrabhairava.	— (Sarasvatī associated in some traditions).
14. Vajrapāṇi Chana Dorje	P/W. Vajra sceptre; often blue, muscular, wrathful and flame-surrounded.	Great Bodhisattva of Power; Vajra family. Peaceful and wrathful forms include Nīlāmbara Vajrapāṇi.	Varies by form.
15. Maitreya Jampa	P. Lotus, water flask or stupa; sometimes legs pendant; loving-kindness.	Future Buddha; presently associated with Tuṣita heaven.	—
16. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Kuntuzangpo	P. Royally ornamented, sometimes with elephant; virtue, offerings and universal bodhisattva activity.	One of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas; expansive vows and enlightened conduct. Not Samantabhadra Buddha.	—
17. Kṣitigarbha Kshitigarbha; Sayi Nyingpo	P. Jewel, sometimes staff; compassion for suffering beings.	One of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas; associated with relief of suffering in the six realms.	—

3. Taras, Female Buddhas and Dakinis

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
18. Green Tara Śyāmatārā; Drölma Jangku	P. Green, right leg extended, blue lotus; swift compassion and protection.	Principal Tara; associated with 21 Taras, Avalokiteśvara and Karma family; identified with Samayatārā in five-mother schemes.	Amoghasiddhi in five-mother identification; usually independent.

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
19. White Tara Sitatārā; Drölkar	P. White, seven eyes, lotus; healing and longevity.	Tara manifestation; one of the Three Long-Life Deities. Sometimes identified with Dhātvīśvarī, though iconographically distinct.	—
20. Vajrayoginī / Vajravārāhī Dorje Naljorma / Dorje Pakmo	S. Usually red, dancing; curved knife, skullcup, bone ornaments. Vajravārāhī usually has a small sow's head.	Principal female yidam/ ḍākinī; especially Sakya/ Kagyu. Vajravārāhī is a major Vajrayoginī form, not an unrelated deity.	Cakrasaṃvara; Vajravārāhī also with Hayagrīva in particular cycles.
21. Prajñāpāramitā Yum Chenmo; Great Mother	P. Golden/yellow; scripture on lotus; transcendent wisdom and emptiness.	Personification of Perfection of Wisdom; Mother of the Buddhas.	Usually independent; wisdom-consort in some tantric contexts.
22. Kurukullā Kurukulle; Rigjema; sometimes Red Tara	S. Red, usually four arms; flower bow, arrow, hook and noose; magnetising power.	Tantric goddess; Tara emanation in some Kriyā Tantra systems, associated with Hevajra in others.	—
23. Uṣṇīṣavijayā Ushnishavijaya; Namgyalma	P. White, generally three faces and eight arms; longevity, purification, victory over untimely death.	One of the Three Long-Life Deities; associated with the Buddha's uṣṇīṣa.	—
24. Vasudhārā Norgyunma	P. Yellow/gold; grain, jewel, vase, generosity; prosperity and fertility.	Wealth goddess; Ratna family; associated with Jambhala.	Jambhala in certain traditions.
25. Sarasvatī Yangchenma; Vajra Sarasvatī	P. Usually white; lute (vīṇā), sometimes scripture; music, eloquence and learning.	Wisdom goddess associated with Mañjuśrī. Magzor Gyalmo is a wrathful manifestation in particular protector traditions.	— (associated with Mañjuśrī).
26. Nairātmyā Dagmema; Vajra Nairātmyā	S. Blue; curved knife, skullcup, bone ornaments; selflessness.	Female tantric Buddha/ ḍākinī; Hevajra Tantra, especially Sakya.	Hevajra.
27. Sitātapatrā Dugkar; White Parasol Goddess	P/commanding. White parasol; sometimes numerous faces, arms and eyes; protection.	Tantric goddess associated with the Buddha's uṣṇīṣa; practised across Tibetan schools.	—

4. Principal Tantric Yidams

Major meditation deities whose principal appearances range from semi-peaceful to wrathful.

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
28. Guhyasamāja Sangdü; Akṣobhyavajra; Mañjuvajra	S. Common Akṣobhyavajra form: blue, three faces, six arms, vajra and bell; method-wisdom union.	Highest Yoga father tantra, especially Gelug. Akṣobhyavajra relates to Akṣobhya; Mañjuvajra belongs to another Guhyasamāja lineage.	Sparśavajrā; names vary by textual cycle.
29. Cakrasaṃvara Chakrasamvara; Korlo Demchok; Śrī Heruka	S. Blue, usually four faces, twelve arms, skull ornaments, vajra and bell; bliss-emptiness. Also two-armed forms.	Highest Yoga mother tantra; Kagyu, Sakya, Gelug. Heruka also denotes a broader tantric class.	Vajravārāhī / Vajrayoginī, according to lineage.
30. Hevajra Kyé Dorje	S. Blue, commonly eight faces, sixteen skullcup-holding arms; ecstatic wisdom and nonduality.	Highest Yoga Tantra; central to Sakya Lamdré. Nondual tantra in Sakya; often mother tantra elsewhere.	Nairātmyā.
31. Kālacakra Kalachakra; Dükhor	S. Blue, four faces, twenty-four arms; symbolic implements, time and cosmology.	Highest Yoga Tantra; outer, inner and alternative cycles; associated with Śambhala.	Viśvamātā (Vishvamata).
32. Yamāntaka / Vajrabhairava Shinjé Shed / Dorje Jigjé	W. Familiar Vajrabhairava: buffalo head, nine faces, thirty-four arms, sixteen legs; conquest of death and ignorance.	Wrathful Mañjuśrī manifestation; Highest Yoga father-tantra yidam, especially Gelug. Vajrabhairava is a principal Yamāntaka form.	Vajravetālī (Dorje Rolangma).
33. Vajrakīlaya Dorje Phurba; Vajrakumāra	W. Usually blue, three faces, six arms; prominent phurba dagger; destruction of obstacles.	Wrathful yidam, especially Nyingma; also other schools. Often identified as wrathful Vajrasattva.	Dīptacakrā (Blazing Wheel).
34. Hayagrīva Tamdrin; Horse-Necked One	W. Usually red, small horse head in hair; powerful compassion and obstacle-subjugation.	Wrathful Padma-family yidam; associated with Avalokiteśvara and Amitābha; also protective.	Vajravārāhī in several tantric cycles.

5. Dharma Protectors and Guardians

Protectors (*dharmapālas*) may be enlightened emanations or worldly oath-bound beings. Some also function as yidams.

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
35. Mahākāla Gönpo; Great Black One	W. Usually black/dark blue; curved knife, skullcup, flaming hair; obstacle removal. Two-, four-, six-armed and White Mahākāla forms.	Major enlightened protector across Tibetan schools. Six-armed and certain other forms emanate from Avalokiteśvara.	Varies.
36. Palden Lhamo Śrī Devī; Dudsolma	W. Dark, riding mule/ donkey; skullcup and fierce ornaments; Dharma protection.	Principal female protector tradition. Four-armed Dudsolma and two-armed Magzor Gyalmo are often grouped under Śrī Devī but have distinct origins; Magzor Gyalmo relates to Sarasvatī.	Varies.
37. Ekajaṭī Ekajati; Ralchigma	W. Dark blue/red; often one eye, fang and breast; protection of secret teachings.	Major Nyingma/Dzogchen protector; terma tradition.	—
38. Yama Dharmarāja Shinjé Chögyal	W. Often buffalo-headed; black/blue, bone staff, lasso, sometimes riding buffalo.	Enlightened protector associated with Vajrabhairava; Outer, Inner, Secret forms. Distinct from Yamāntaka yidam.	Cāmuṇḍī, especially Outer Dharmarāja.
39. Begtse Begtse Chen; Jamsaran	W. Red armoured warrior; sword, spear, human heart; fierce protection.	Dharma protector; Sakya, Gelug and Mongolian Buddhism.	Rigpé Lhamo, consort or sister-consort in different accounts.
40. Vaiśravaṇa Vaishravana; Namthösé; related to Kubera	P/commanding. Yellow/ gold, armour, victory banner, jewel-spitting mongoose; wealth and protection.	Northern Guardian King (Lokapāla); Buddhist wealth deity associated with Kubera.	—
41. Jambhala Dzambhala	P/W. Often yellow, corpulent, with mongoose, fruit or jewel; also white, black, red, green forms.	Tantric wealth deity; associated with, but distinct from, Vaiśravaṇa.	Vasudhārā in certain forms.
42. Pehar Gyalpo Pehar; Pekar	W/warrior. Five manifestations; often multiple faces/ arms, riding animals.	Worldly protector; Nyingma and Nechung traditions. Dorje Drakden, linked with the Nechung Oracle, is described as minister or manifestation.	—
43. Dorje Legpa Damchen Dorje Legpa; Vajrasādhu	W/warrior. Often snow-lion-mounted, holding vajra or ritual implements.	Worldly oath-bound protector; Nyingma terma tradition.	—

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
44. Rāhula Rahula; Kyabjuk; Gza Rāhula	W. Nine heads, numerous eyes, serpent lower body, bow and arrow; protection against harmful forces.	Major Nyingma protector; Indian planetary/eclipsing mythology. Not Rāhula, Shakyamuni's son.	—

Supplement: Padmasambhava

Major Tantric Master and Progenitor of the Nyingma Tradition

Deity & alternative names	Attributes & appearance	Identity & affiliations	Consort
45. Padmasambhava Guru Rinpoche; Pema Jungné; Lotus-Born Guru	P/S/W by manifestation. Principal form: lotus hat, vajra, skullcup and khaṭvāṅga; tantric mastery and overcoming obstacles.	Indian tantric master revered as Second Buddha; central to Tibetan Vajrayāna and Nyingma. Traditionally an Amitābha emanation; Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, with related wrathful Guru Drakpo forms.	Yeshe Tsogyal and Mandāravā.

Eight Manifestations: Guru Orgyen Dorje Chang, Guru Shakya Sengge, Guru Pema Gyalpo, Guru Pema Jungné, Guru Loden Choksé, Guru Nyima Özer, Guru Sengé Dradok and Guru Dorje Drölö—peaceful, royal, ascetic and wrathful forms.

Appendix: Identities, Manifestations and Relationships

Terminology

Term	Meaning
Also known as	Alternative name for the same figure.
Form of	Specific manifestation within a wider identity or class.
Emanation of	Traditional identification as another figure's manifestation.
Associated with	Shared family, practice or theological relationship without necessary identity.

Principal Relationships

Figures	Relationship
Samantabhadra Buddha / Vajradhara	Related primordial-Buddha representations in different tantric traditions; iconographically distinct.
Samantabhadra Buddha / Samantabhadra Bodhisattva	Same Sanskrit and Tibetan names; distinct theological identities.
Akṣobhya / Vajrasattva / Akṣobhyavajra	Respectively Dhyani Buddha, associated purification deity and principal Guhyasamāja form; not universally interchangeable.
Amitābha / Amitāyus	Amitāyus is Amitābha's longevity manifestation.
Amitābha / Avalokiteśvara / Hayagrīva	Padma-family relationship; Hayagrīva is a wrathful Avalokiteśvara emanation.
Avalokiteśvara / Mahākāla	Six-armed and certain other Mahākāla forms emanate from Avalokiteśvara.
Mañjuśrī / Yamāntaka / Vajrabhairava	Wrathful wisdom manifestations; Vajrabhairava is a principal buffalo-headed Yamāntaka form.
Vajrayoginī / Vajravārāhī	Vajravārāhī belongs to the Vajrayoginī tradition, generally distinguished by a sow's head.
Cakrasaṃvara / Vajravārāhī	Principal tantric union in the Cakrasaṃvara system.
Hevajra / Nairātmyā	Principal tantric union in the Hevajra system.
Tara / Green Tara / White Tara / Kurukullā	Related Tara traditions; Kurukullā is a Tara emanation in certain systems. The 21 Taras vary by enumeration and iconography.
Amitāyus / White Tara / Uṣṇīṣavijayā	Three Long-Life Deities (Tse Lha Nam Sum).
Palden Lhamo / Magzor Gyalmo / Sarasvatī	Śrī Devī protector relationships; Magzor Gyalmo is wrathful Sarasvatī in important lineages.
Ekajaṭī / Rāhula / Dorje Legpa	Three principal Nyingma terma protectors (Ma Za Dor Sum).
Vaiśravaṇa / Jambhala / Vasudhārā	Related wealth-deity systems; distinct figures with tradition-specific consort or emanation associations.
Padmasambhava / Amitābha	Padmasambhava is traditionally an Amitābha emanation, especially in Nyingma accounts.

Selected References

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CLASSIFICATION NOTE
Consort relationships, Buddha-family assignments and iconographic attributes vary across tantric systems and lineages; entries describe principal forms rather than exhaustive identities.