The Statue of Tara: A Glimpse into Spiritual Serenity at the British Museum

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Abstract

This research article explores the statue of the Goddess Tara, a significant artifact acquired during the colonial era and housed in the British Museum. Dated to the 8th-9th century CE and unearthed between Trincomalee and Batticaloa, this remarkable statue represents the intersection of spirituality and art in Buddhist culture from ancient Sri Lanka. More than just an artistic achievement; the statue of Tara encapsulates centuries of religious significance and cultural exchange. Positioned at the heart of the South Asian section of the British Museum, the statue allows visitors to engage with the enduring legacy of Buddhist artistry and the tranquillity associated with worship. The study delves into the historical context of Tara's veneration within Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, tracing her cult's evolution from Northern India and its potential diffusion into Sri Lanka through trade networks between India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka. Despite the lack of direct evidence of Tara worship in Sri Lanka according to previous scholarly work, I argue that the dynamic exchange of cultural practices between regions could have facilitated her introduction to Sri Lanka. Ultimately, this exploration of the Goddess Tara serves to enrich our understanding of Buddhist heritage and the spiritual serenity it offers to diverse audiences around the world.

Key words: Buddhism, Buddhist statue, Mahayana, Female deity, Bodhisattva

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Background

This sculpture of Tara, a revered Buddhist goddess of compassion, originates from the region between Trincomalee and Batticaloa in Sri Lanka, an area that in the 19th century was under British colonial rule. Dating to approximately AD 700–800, the piece was created within the cultural and religious traditions of ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist communities, where it once held spiritual, artistic, and social significance. Its presence in the British Museum is the result of a chain of custody shaped by the unequal power relations of empire building.

The artifact was “found” during the British colonial period and later donated in 1830 by Sir R. Brownrigg, a senior British colonial administrator and military figure in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The circumstances of its removal—whether through archaeological extraction, collection, appropriation, or other modes of transfer—remain embedded within the broader structures of colonial authority that governed access to land, sacred sites, and cultural heritage.

This pre-statement acknowledges that the sculpture’s journey from Sri Lanka to Britain took place in a context where local communities had limited agency in determining the fate of their cultural property. Its current location in the Museum reflects a historical legacy in which objects from colonised regions were systematically relocated to imperial centres, often without meaningful consent or equitable exchange. Recognising this history is an essential step toward transparent provenance practices, ethical stewardship, and deeper engagement with Sri Lankan perspectives on the cultural, religious, and historical significance of the statue of Goddess Tara.

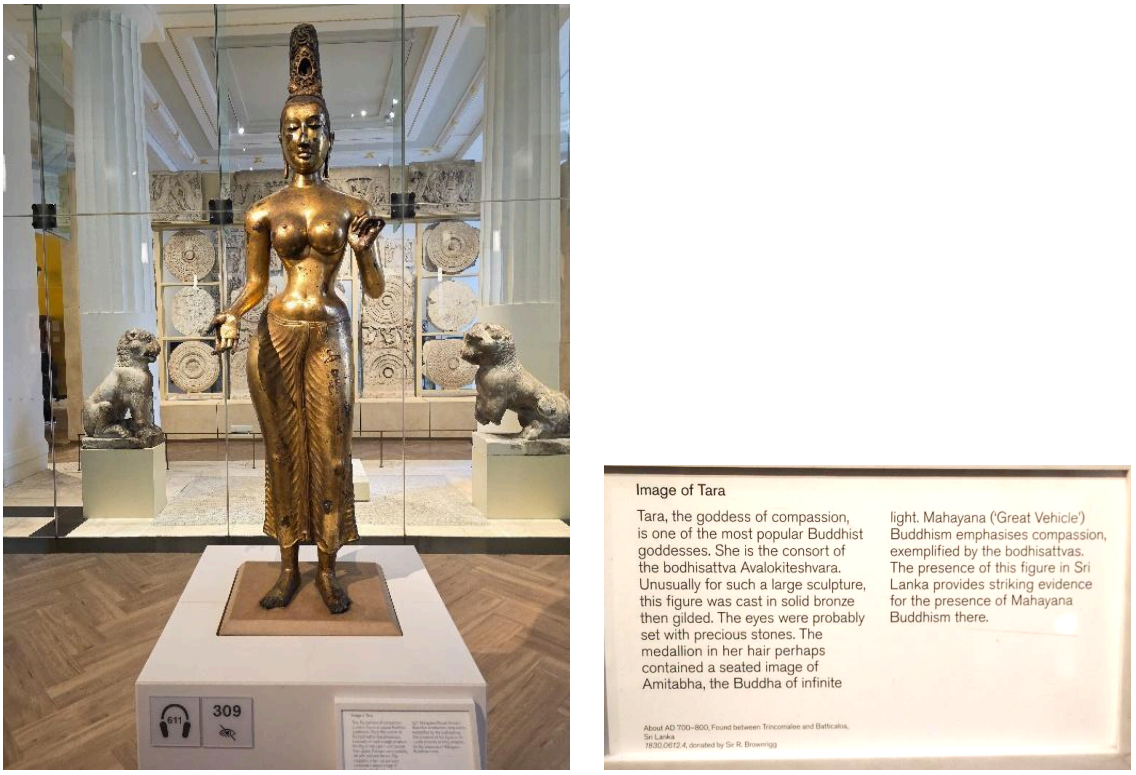

Figure 1. Full view of the gilded-bronze statue of Tara, the Buddhist goddess of compassion and protection, displayed in the South Asia gallery of the British Museum with an accompanying explanation.

The rich tapestry of spiritual art and culture found in the British Museum draws visitors from around the globe, eager to explore the stories and histories encapsulated within its ancient artifacts. Among these exhibits, the statue of the Goddess Tara stands out for her enduring significance and beauty in Buddhist art from ancient Sri Lanka, dating to the 8th-9th century CE and discovered between Trincomalee and Batticaloa. This awe-inspiring artifact transcends time and space, featuring dimensions comparable to a real person and is prominently placed at the centre of the South Asian section of the museum (Figure 1). This remarkable sculpture not only embodies the rich legacy of Buddhist art in Sri Lanka but also offers visitors a glimpse into the spiritual serenity that has captivated hearts for centuries.

A Brief History of Tara

Tara, a goddess revered in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, has gained considerable prominence within these traditions. B. K. Bhattacharya (2003) explains that the worship of Tara emerged from a blending of the ideas associated with Lakshmi and Parvati during the second or third century CE. He further clarifies that Tara was not initially conceived as a folk deity; rather, she is rooted in a more complex spiritual framework and cosmological understanding. According to Pushpendra Kumar (1992), the cult of Tara became particularly popular in India from the 6th century CE onward until the 12th and 13th centuries. Scholars have traced the origins of the Tara cult to Northern India, near Tibet, and have noted a lack of evidence supporting the existence of Tara worship in Southern India (Stevens, 2022). However, Bhattacharya (2003) has listed a stone Tara image from the *Terur* Temple in the Kanyakumari District based on the archaeological sources of South India. In his analysis, Bhattacharya (2003) highlights several countries where Tara worship was prevalent; however, he does not include Sri Lanka in this list. He states:

> Tara is the second Mahavidya in the Hindu Pantheon. She is also a major Mahayana Buddhist deity, especially worshiped in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Tibet, China, Mongolia, and Indochina. (p. pixi)

Despite the omission of Sri Lanka, it is noteworthy that extensive trade activities occurred between India and China with Sri Lanka during the 6th-12th centuries, which could have facilitated the introduction of Tara worship from Tibet into Sri Lanka. Gunawardana (2019) states that Goddess Tara probably entered Buddhism around the 6th century CE.

Sri Lanka is recognised as the birthplace of Theravada Buddhism, which embodies the original teachings of Buddhism. In contrast, Buddhism in neighbouring India evolved significantly after the 3rd century BCE, leading to the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, which reflected these developments. Although Mahayana was introduced to Sri Lanka in the early centuries of the Common Era, it began to take root more firmly around the 6th century CE. During this time, statues of important figures such as Avalokitesvara and Manjushri were created, and

inscriptions honouring these Bodhisattvas were found, for example, at *Tiriyaya* (Pushpendra, 1992).

The period from the reign of Sena II (866-901 CE) until the Chola conquest of Sri Lanka in 1017 is particularly noteworthy for this study. Analysis of monuments from this period reveals substantial activity within the Mahayana school of Buddhism, which thrived alongside Theravada Buddhism. The Tantric goddess Tara was recognised, and images were created for her worship. Mahayana texts were known, and excerpts were inscribed on copper tablets that were enshrined in stupas with distinctly Mahayanist characteristics (Pushpendra, 1992).

Literary works from the 14th and 15th centuries reference numerous Bodhisattvas within the Mahayana tradition. The *Sandesa* poems mention Natha (Avalokitesvara) and his consort Tara, with *Tisara Sandesa* from the 14th century specifically referring to the shrine of Natha in Dorawake*,* Kegalla District. Tara is described as a queen (*biso*), a term used for the divine consorts in Sinhalese literature. At *Wegiri-deval*, Natha's partner is also commonly known as Biso-Bandara (Pushpendra,1992).

When Von Schroeder (1990) mentions Mahayana Bodhisattva bronzes discovered in the Anuradhapura period in *lalitasana* (seated posture of one leg tucked in and the other leg dangling down) position, he states that four bronze images portray Avalokitesvara in rajalilasana position (flexible pose considered as the royal pose of ease, with a raised leg and casually draped arm) and those images clearly have South Indian influence from the bronze images discovered in Velippalayam and Nagapattinam. Therefore, the goddess images of South India could have influenced the making of the Tara bronze images too. MacGregor (2010) notes that one of the most intriguing aspects of this sculpture of Tara in the British Museum is that it was created during a period when its subject had only recently transitioned to the Buddhist realm. He says that, initially recognised as a Hindu mother goddess, she was later embraced by Buddhist traditions. This shift serves as a striking illustration of the ongoing interaction and blending between Buddhism and Hinduism that occurred over the centuries.

The Mahayanist sculptures found in Sri Lanka are quite fascinating, says Pushpendra Kumar, noting that they are characterized by their intricate and diverse designs. Some of these sculptures are housed in museums such as the British Museum in London, the Boston Museum in the USA, and the National Museum of Sri Lanka. The Mahayanists in Sri Lanka created representations of deities like Avalokitesvara, Vajrapani, Manjushri, Jambhala, Tara, and Cunda. Many of these deities were venerated, and their associated cults flourished towards the end of the Anuradhapura period. The creation of these artworks spanned from the 7th to the 12th centuries, and the local cults surrounding them endured until about the 15th century (Pushpendra, 1992).

Goddess Tara, known as the "Mother of Liberation," is a revered figure in Tibetan Buddhism. Known primarily as a Bodhisattva of compassion and action, she embodies the active side of compassion, stepping forth to assist those in need. Tara is often depicted as a young, beautiful woman, in various forms, including the well-known Green Tara and White Tara, each representing different attributes and

blessings: Green Tara is associated with protection from fear and obstacles, often depicted with a dynamic posture representing her readiness to act. White Tara, on the other hand, symbolizes purity, long life, and serenity, often shown seated in a meditative pose. With her representation as a nurturing figure, Tara transcends the boundaries of ethnicity and geography, embodying an ideal of female empowerment within Buddhist philosophy.

Tara's spiritual significance extends beyond religious practices; she represents an ideal figure for both women and men, inspiring empowerment, compassion, and courage in the face of adversity. For centuries, Tara has been a source of inspiration and devotion among Buddhists. Pilgrims and practitioners often recite the "Tara Mantra" to seek her blessings and guidance in their lives. This spiritual connection adds layers of meaning to the statue, transforming it from a mere artifact into a living symbol of faith.

The significance of Tara extends beyond the confines of Buddhism; she has also influenced various Hindu cultures across Asia. In different traditions, Tara is seen as a protector, a guide, and a source of strength, making her a universal figure that resonates with a diverse array of beliefs and practices. Additionally, Tara's diverse interpretations and depictions showcase the syncretism of cultures within Buddhist art. The integration of various regional styles is evident in her representations at the Museum of Calcutta and the Patna Museum, stimulating discussions about how art transcends borders and connects diverse belief systems (Pushpendra, 1992).

The Artistic Mastery of the Tara Statue

Mahayana Buddhist art frequently includes influences from various cultures and religions, illustrating how Buddhism has disseminated across different areas and engaged with local traditions. A notable example is Greco-Buddhist art from Central Asia, which merges Greek and Indian artistic techniques to create distinctive sculptures of the Buddha. Although the Buddhist pantheon is predominantly composed of male deities, female figures such as Tara, Guanyin, and the Buddha-like goddess Yakushi-nyorai are essential to the Mahayana tradition. These deities embody different facets of Buddhist principles, including compassion, wisdom, and the strength inherent in the feminine.

The Tara statue housed in the British Museum dates to the 8th-9th century, a time when the artistic expression of Buddhism flourished in the Himalayan region. Crafted from gilt bronze, the statue is a stunning demonstration of the skill and devotion of the artisans who created it.

MacGregor (2010) states:

> Whoever made her must have had a great deal of bronze, rare skills and a lot of experience of this very challenging kind of work (p. 296).

The intricate details of Tara's clothing, the gentle curves of her body, and the serene expression on her face all contribute to the figure's tranquil allure. This standing female deity of Tara is a gilded bronze statue that dates to the Anuradhapura period.

In his study of the bronze images of standing Buddhas from this period, Von Schroeder (1990) notes:

> It appears at first as an enigma that there were only seven standing figures among the almost two hundred known bronze Buddhas dating from the Late Anuradhapura Period. The majority of the ancient bronzes discovered in Sri Lanka are representations of the Buddha seated in *Virasana*, displaying the *dhyana mudra* (p.175).

Thus, Von Schroeder's commentary on standing Buddha's bronze images highlights the significance of the Tara image displayed in the British Museum. This bronze image of Tara is of an iconographic type rarely encountered in Sri Lanka by its size and pose, but could be quite common in North-East India.

The figure has a height of 143 centimetres (excluding the plinth), a width of 44 centimetres, and a depth of 29.5 centimetres (British Museum, 2023). The right hand displays the *varadamudrā* (gesture of gift-giving), while the left hand forms *katakahastamudrā* (a gesture resembling holding a flower). Notably, the two middle fingers of the right hand and some toes on both feet are absent (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Detailed view of the gilt-bronze statue of Tara at the British Museum, showing the feet, torso and gestures of the hands.

This specific statue was discovered in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka during the period of British rule from 1812 to 1822. While the Governor at the time, Sir Robert Brownrigg, presented the sculpture to the British Museum in 1830, it was never displayed initially and was kept out of view in a storeroom in the Museum, called *the Secretum*, for around thirty years or so, as the statue's nudity was seen as "too obscene" and inappropriate for the contemporary British audience (MacGregor, 2010).

MacGregor (2010) thinks that there must have been a matching sculpture of her male consort, Avalokiteshvara, nearby, but his image has not survived. It is assumed that her left hand may originally have held a lotus. In Buddhist iconography, both the goddess Tara and the Hindu goddess Lakshmi are often illustrated with lotus flowers, which represent enlightenment, purity, and spiritual

freedom. Tara is typically depicted as a strong female deity seated on a lotus throne while holding lotuses. Likewise, Lakshmi, known as the goddess of wealth and prosperity in Hinduism, shares this association with the lotus and is occasionally identified with Tara within Buddhist contexts. Additionally, Von Schroeder (1990) has noted various *Naginis* and *Yaksinis* from the 3rd to the 5th century who are depicted holding flowers, which offer intriguing avenues for further study.

At first glance, the Statue of Tara captivates one with its exquisite artistry. The golden sheen of the bronze catches the light, drawing attention to the delicately sculpted features of Tara's face. Her eyes, slightly downcast, exude a sense of calm and contemplation, inviting viewers to pause and reflect. According to the British Museum, it is likely that the eyes were originally adorned with precious stones. The eye carries deep meaning in many South Asian belief systems and fields of study. In Hinduism, it represents enhanced perception and is associated with spiritual understanding as well as the rainy season. Tibetan Buddhism views the eye as a sensory organ focused on certain perceptions, while *Shilpashastra* pays attention to its intricate anatomy. Various traditions, such as Vedanta and Vaishnavism, also see the eye as a pathway to recognising higher truths and the Self. In scientific contexts, the eye is studied for its function in vision and its relationship with brain activity. Overall, the eye symbolises perception, insight, and the possibility of enlightenment. Some bronze images of Lord Buddha that belong to the late Anuradhapura period have their crystal eye settings still intact, whereas with others, the inlay is lost. In the case of a superbly cast small seated Buddha image, only the pupils are hollow-worked (Von Schroeder, 1990).

All Hindu and Buddhist icons, regardless of their size and material, required ritual consecration before they were considered objects of worship. The ceremony undertaken was commonly known as *netra pinkama* in the Sinhalese language (eye merit action or eye-opening ceremony), during which the hollow-worked eyes were inset with crystal, or in rare cases with gemstones. For those images without inlaid eyes, the engraving or painting of the eyes and pupils served the same consecratory purpose. The sculpture of Tara, characterised by her gently downcast eyes, prominently displays the absence of inlay, which adds to its historical significance. Despite this loss, the inherent beauty of the bronze statue remains undiminished. The elegant features and serene expression of Tara continue to captivate viewers, demonstrating that even with such imperfections, the artistic value and emotive power of the piece endure. This resilience highlights the complex relationship between art, preservation, and the passage of time, inviting further exploration into the cultural and aesthetic implications of such sculptures.

This statue of Tara has a high, tubular hairstyle (*jatamukuta*) secured by a medallion, which has water creature motifs (*makara*) on either side. This medallion likely once featured gemstones, as did the eyes. The figure has elongated earlobes and is dressed in a fitted garment that is tied at the hips, leaving the upper body bare without any jewelry.

One cannot help but admire the intricacy of Tara's adornments, which encompass her detailed clothing, crown, and body language. Her left leg is slightly extended, causing her slender hip to tilt to the left. With her golden complexion and

elongated face, she appears to depict a person who is neither young nor old, exuding a timeless beauty. The deep-rooted symbolism in the statue's design goes beyond aesthetics; it represents the Buddhist ideals of grace, peace, and the transcendent nature of the divine (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Detailed views of the crowned head of the statue of Tara

Within the British Museum's catalogue, we find two other small Tara statues that belong to Sri Lanka, and are described below. Dating back to the 7th-8th century, the first seated Tara image was discovered in Anuradhapura. The image has been cast in a copper alloy and gilded. The goddess is shown seated in *lalitāsana*, with high beehive-like hair and a band of cloth from shoulder to waist; the lower body is draped; gilding is preserved on the face, with traces elsewhere. The figure has a height of 15 centimetres, a width of 11.30 centimetres, and a depth of 8.50 centimetres. This figure has been exhibited in many countries around the world between 1994-2017. The full details of the exhibitions for this image have been listed in the British Museum's collection of images (British Museum, 1898, 0702.142). (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Tara statue from Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, dated between 7th-8th centuries. British Museum Catalogue.

The second Tara statue, which is not on display but noted in the British Museum's catalogue, dates to the 10th century. This image was discovered in Anuradhapura and has been cast in bronze. The goddess is shown standing on a plinth, with high beehive-like hair and a band of cloth from shoulder to waist; the lower body is draped; gilding is preserved on the face, with traces elsewhere. The figure has a height of 16.90 centimetres, a width of 6 centimetres, and a depth of 5.50 centimetres (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Tara statue from Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, dated to the 10th century. British Museum Catalogue.

In the British Museum catalogue, various other depictions of the Goddess Tara can be found, offering insight into her iconography and the role she plays in Buddhist worship. Most of these figures are not on display. Two notable artifacts are the bronze seated figure of Tara on an oval lotus throne (Museum Number 1859,1228.32) and the seated Green Tara stone figure (Museum no. 1964,0617.2), both carved in the Pala style. These pieces, found in Java and Orissa respectively

and dating to the 9th century CE, exemplify exquisite craftsmanship and highlight the intricate symbolism associated with Tara.

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Conclusion

The decline of Tara worship in Sri Lanka can be attributed to a confluence of historical, cultural, and religious shifts. As Buddhism solidified its presence and influence in the region, the traditions surrounding Tara, once a significant figure in the spiritual landscape, gradually diminished. This transition mirrored broader changes in religious practices and beliefs, where local deities and goddess worship were often integrated into or overshadowed by dominant Buddhist teachings. As a result, the once vibrant devotion to Tara faded, leaving behind a complex heritage that highlights the dynamic interplay between Buddhism and Indigenous beliefs in Sri Lanka's rich spiritual history. Today, while Tara may no longer hold a prominent place in Sri Lankan worship, her legacy persists as a testament to the cultural syncretism that has shaped the island's religious identity over time.

The standing statue of Tara at the British Museum demonstrates how the beauty of cultural heritage and the power of art transcend boundaries - bridging regional styles, diverse cultures, linking various belief systems - which spark conversations about these connections. Whether you are a connoisseur of art, a seeker of spiritual inspiration, or simply a curious visitor, this magnificent sculpture invites you to pause, reflect, and appreciate the deeper meaning behind its creation. In a world that often feels chaotic, Tara stands as a beacon of compassion, guiding us toward a more harmonious existence. As we delve into the intricacies of her presence in the museum, we are invited to reflect on Goddess Tara’s association with compassion and action, sustaining the dialogue about the relevance of ancient wisdom in our modern world.

If you find yourself at the British Museum, taking the time to visit the statue of Tara is a must. Located in the museum's Asian galleries, the statue invites visitors to take in its beauty and ponder its historical and spiritual significance. The serene environment of the galleries encourages contemplation, making it a perfect setting to connect with the rich narratives embedded in this piece of art.

As you stand before the statue, consider the journey of faith and artistry that has brought Tara to this moment. Reflect on the enduring power of compassion and the importance of spiritual exploration in our lives. The statue of Tara is more than just a representation of a deity; it is a reminder of the interconnectedness of all people and the universal pursuit of peace and understanding.

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