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THE ICONOGRAPHY AND VISUAL COSMOLOGY OF AVALOKITESHVARA IN BUDDHIST ART

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ABSTRACT

Buddha images are not just visual representations of religious teachings; they also encompass philosophical doctrines and mythological concepts. Kālacakra, a central deity in Vajrayāna Buddhism, represents the universe, time cycles, and layers of consciousness through a sophisticated visual system. His iconography integrates cosmology, philosophy, numerical symbolism, and cognitive models to provide a comprehensive depiction of his importance.

This research delves into the iconography and visual cosmology of the Kālacakra Buddha, the main deity of Highest Yoga Tantra in Vajrayāna Buddhism, using a thorough analysis based on art historical methods. The Kālacakra, also referred to as Tsagiin Hürd in Mongolian and Düinkhor in Tibetan, serves as a complex visual system that combines astronomical, physiological, and metaphysical ideas to create a cohesive cosmological structure.

The research explores how the deity's iconographic features, such as his four heads, twelve shoulders, twenty-four hands, and yab-yum posture, serve as a visual language to convey the philosophy of cyclical time, the interconnectedness of the macrocosm and microcosm, and the path to enlightenment. Using Erwin Panofsky's three-level iconographic analysis, this study demonstrates that the Kālacakra iconography functions on multiple levels: at the formal level as a multi-armed tantric deity, at the iconographic level as a symbolic representation of the outer, inner, and secret wheels of time, and at the iconological level as a metaphysical cosmological system embodying non-dual philosophy.

Additionally, the mandala surrounding the deity serves as a tripartite system, functioning as a cosmogram, psychogram, and ritual space. This study reveals that Buddhist art, particularly in the Kālacakra tradition, is not just decorative but a profound philosophical and cognitive framework that conveys intellectual culture visually, establishing a direct connection between aesthetic form and metaphysical teachings.

KEYWORDS

Kālacakra, Iconography, Visual Cosmology, Symbolism, Mandala, Buddhist Art

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Introduction

The Kālacakra tradition, which originated in India, is believed to have spread from the mythical land of Shambhala to various parts of the world between the eighth and ninth centuries. In Tibet, it was further developed in a systematic manner during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it eventually reached the imperial court of the Manchu Qing dynasty in the eighteenth century. In Mongolia, the tradition gained significant momentum in the early nineteenth century, with the Fourth Bogd Jebtsundamba playing a pivotal role in its dissemination.

Following a hiatus due to the 1921 revolution, the tradition has experienced a revival since 1990, with a notable event being the conferral of the Kālacakra initiation in Mongolia by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in 1997. The iconography of the Kālacakra Buddha serves as a vehicle for conveying religious philosophy and cosmological concepts through symbolic imagery .[1] The external appearance, posture, attributes, color palette, and mandala structure of the Kālacakra Buddha are all intricately linked to the teachings of the outer, inner, and secret wheels of time.[2] Therefore, a comprehensive study of Kālacakra iconography is essential for understanding the symbolic and philosophical underpinnings of Buddhist art.

Research Methodology

This study examines the methods of Buddhist art symbology and iconographic analysis.[3,4] The iconographic representation of the Kālacakra Buddha is investigated on the formal, iconographic, and iconological levels.

Main Discussion

The Kālacakra Buddha, also called Tsagiin Hürd in Mongolian and Düinkhor in Tibetan, is the main deity of the Highest Yoga Tantra in Vajrayāna Buddhism. It symbolizes the integrated system of time, the universe, and human consciousness as described in the Dictionary of Buddhas in 2000.

The Kālacakra Buddha's origins date back to 625 BCE and are considered the second teaching given by Shakyamuni Buddha. Various accounts describe how the Buddha transmitted the Kālacakra tradition. According to one account, when the Buddha was 36 years old and staying at the Glorious Shrī Dhānyakataka Stūpa, King Sūcandra of Shambhala, along with other kings, emanations, and celestial beings, arrived through miraculous powers. They offered jeweled flowers, prostrated before the Buddha, and repeatedly requested him to teach the practices that liberate beings from saṃsāra. In response, the Buddha manifested as the Kālacakra Buddha and bestowed upon them the initiation (abhiṣeka) along with the root tantra.

The Buddha imparted the Glorious Kālacakra Root Tantra, a text consisting of twelve thousand verses, as his teaching. King Sūcandra of Shambhala led a group of 97 kings who came to receive this teaching. The Buddha granted them the full empowerment of the 722 deities of the

Kālacakra mandala, including the body, speech, and mind of the main deity Kālacakra.

The Kālacakra Buddha is considered one of the yidam deities (ཡིད་མ) in the mother tantra of the Mahāyāna lamrim-style tantric path, being a deity that is attained through the meditative practice of Mahāyāna tantric adornment.

Yidam deities are considered the supreme deities that embody the essential nature of all buddhas, encompassing the core teachings of meditative practice in the root tantras of the secret mantra tradition taught by the Buddha. When meditating on a yidam deity, their celestial palace and accompanying deities are externally manifested in visual form through the inner wisdom of realization. Essentially, the mandala visually represents the activities of a yidam deity.

While a Buddha image is essentially a product of creative imagination, it is not confined to its external appearance alone. It is deeply connected to historical narratives, religious philosophy, and mythological abstract concepts. In Buddhism, each Buddha image has a unique and irreplaceable iconographic form. The physical posture, facial expression, gaze, positioning of hands and feet, finger gestures, body shape, clothing,

[1] Wallace, V. A. (2001). *The Inner Kālacakratantra: A Buddhist Tantric View of the Individual*. Oxford University Press.

[2] Newman, J. (1987). The outer wheel of time: Vajrayāna Buddhist cosmology in the Kālacakra Tantra. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, *10*(1), 57–86.

[3] Panofsky, E. (1955). *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. University of Chicago Press.

[4] Beer, R. (2003). *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. Serindia Publications.

jewelry, and ceremonial objects held by the Buddha and accompanying figures all convey philosophical and symbolic meanings, following established canonical guidelines.

The art historian N. Tsültem explains that the assembly of Buddhas painted by Mongolian Buddhist artists is not a portrait of any specific individual, but rather a symbolic representation intended to convey religious significance. The composition, body movements, and ritual objects depicted in the artwork must adhere strictly to established conventions in order to preserve the underlying meaning. When creating a Buddha image, the artist is required to follow the prescribed canon without introducing any personal creativity or modifications.

The first volume of the Kangyur includes a text called Kālacakra, which translates to "Wheel of Time" in the tantric tradition. The deity associated with this text is Kālacakra, who is known as the Buddha of the Wheel of Time. Kālacakra is represented in a unique iconographic form that reflects his teachings.

The Visual Cosmology of the Kālacakra Buddha

The visual cosmology of the Kālacakra Buddha is a comprehensive cosmological framework that conveys concepts of time, the universe's organization, the mind-body connection, and the journey to enlightenment using visual elements like imagery, geometry, color, and numerical balance.[1,2] In essence, it represents a philosophical understanding of the universe depicted through a visual code.

Table1. The foundation of this cosmology is the three wheels of time

Wheel of Time	Cosmological Meaning	Visual Expression
Outer Time	Astronomy, seasons, 12 months	12 shoulders, 24 hands, 360-part structure
Inner Time	Breath, winds, channels	21,600 breath calculations
Secret Time	Enlightenment, great bliss	Yab-Yum union

The mandala represents the map of the universe. The Kālacakra mandala is structured with ***a central deity, four cardinal directions, four intermediate directions, layers representing the five elements, and an outer ring of fire.***

This structure serves a triple purpose: as a geometric cosmogram (a map of the universe), a psychogram (a hierarchy of the mind), and a ritual space.

Table2.Numerical symmetry and cycles of time

Number	Cosmological Meaning
12	Months / energies
24	Hours of the day
30	Days in a month
360	Annual cycle
21,600	Daily breaths

Table 3. The cosmology of colors: each color is both a cosmological element and an expression of cognitive quality.

Color	Element	Wisdom
Blue	Space	Mirror-like
White	Water	Equanimity
Red	Fire	Discernment
Yellow	Earth	Accomplishing action
Green	Wind	Dharma-element

The yab-yum composition represents the union of method (upāya) and wisdom (prajñā). At the visual level, this is the central point of cosmological movement—the intersection of time and enlightenment.

[1] Tucci, G. (1961). *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*. Rider & Company.

[2] Wallace, V. A. (2001). *The Inner Kālacakratantra: A Buddhist Tantric View of the Individual*. Oxford University Press.

The Iconographic Analysis

The term iconography comes from the Greek words eikōn (image, figure) and graphein (to write, to depict). Essentially, it means "writing about images" or "the study of figures." In the field of art history, iconography is the practice of recognizing, categorizing, and explaining the symbols, images, characteristics, and artistic meanings in visual works. Erwin Panofsky established the structured theoretical basis for modern iconography with his three-level model of analysis.[1] When applied to the depiction of the Kālacakra Buddha, this model results in the following:

The Formal (Pre-iconographical) Level. This level focuses on identifying the visible elements of the image without cultural analysis, simply noting its visual features:

- ✓ Four heads
- ✓ 12 shoulders
- ✓ 24 hands
- ✓ Yab-Yum posture
- ✓ Ring of fire
- ✓ Seated on a lotus base
- ✓ Positioned at the center of the mandala

The Iconographic Level delves into the questions of "Who is depicted?" and "What is being expressed?" It connects the figure to cultural tradition, doctrine, and religious texts, viewing the image as a code. For instance, Kālacakra, known as the "Wheel of Time," symbolizes three wheels representing outer, inner, and secret time. The symbolism includes:

- ✓ 4 faces representing the 4 cardinal directions
- ✓ 24 hands symbolizing the 24 hours
- ✓ 12 shoulders corresponding to the 12 months
- ✓ 5 fingers representing the 5 elements
- ✓ Finger joints symbolizing days
- ✓ This level interprets the image within a symbolic system.

The Iconological Level. This level delves into the question: "Why is it conveyed through this specific imagery?" It represents the most profound level of philosophical examination. At the iconological level, the Kālacakra conveys the following concepts:

The Philosophy of Time. In this philosophy, time is seen as a dynamic structure within the universe. For instance, each finger has 3 joints, so 5 fingers × 3 = 15 joints. With 10 fingers (both hands), that totals 30 joints. When multiplied by the 12 shoulders, it equals 360. Adding 1 for the body and 4 for the heads gives a total of 365, symbolizing the 365 days of the external world and the presence of the 360 subtle winds in the internal world. Similarly, if we consider 15 breaths per minute × 24 hours, we get 21,600 breaths per day, reflecting the inner circulation of the 12 winds.

Non-duality (advaya) is represented by the Yab-Yum, which symbolizes the combination of method (upāya) and wisdom (prajñā), resulting in a cognitive philosophy that goes beyond the separation between subject and object. The Kālacakra imagery serves as a cosmological analogy, visually illustrating the concept that the Universe, Body, and Consciousness are interconnected.

When examining these three levels, we observe a multi-handed deity at the formal level, recognize him as the Buddha of the Wheel of Time at the iconographic level, and comprehend the symbolism used at the iconological level, which conveys the cycles of time and the philosophy of non-duality. Therefore, it is fitting to view Kālacakra iconography not only as the analysis of image identification but as a cosmological system conveyed through visual language.

Why is it appropriate to refer to this as a system? Because each number and color holds significance, every hand serves a purpose, and the mandala is organized in a hierarchical manner is all components are interconnected. This design is not a haphazard decoration but a logically consistent, structured system.

[1] Panofsky, E. (1955). *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. University of Chicago Press.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the depiction of the Kālacakra Buddha in Buddhist art goes beyond being just a form of devotional iconography or decorative art. Instead, it is a meticulously structured visual system that incorporates philosophy, cosmology, numerical symbolism, and a cognitive framework.

When examining the iconography of the Kālacakra using Panofsky's three-level theory, we can see that at the formal level, it features a tantric deity with multiple arms, heads, and a yab-yum composition. At the iconographic level, the image is decoded through symbolic representations such as the cycles of time, the four cardinal directions, the twelve months, the five elements, and the flow of inner energies. Finally, at the iconological level, the Kālacakra imagery conveys the philosophy of cyclical time, the integration of method and wisdom, the correlation between universe-body-consciousness, and the metaphysics of non-dual cognition.

Additionally, the visual cosmology of the Kālacakra, based on the concept of the three wheels of time, combines the astronomical patterns of the external universe, the flow of internal body-mind energies, and the enlightened state of secret time into a cohesive design of geometry, color, and numerical balance. The numerical patterns like 12, 24, 30, 360, and 21,600 are not random figures but a systematic cosmological framework that illustrates the connection between the larger universe and the individual body.

Therefore, the iconography of the Kālacakra should not be limited to image recognition and symbolic analysis alone. It is more appropriate to view it as a metaphysical cosmological system expressed through visual language, serving as a cognitive framework. This underscores that Buddhist art is not just about aesthetics but also represents a legacy of intellectual culture, conveying philosophical insights through visual means.

Future research could explore the visual cosmology of the Kālacakra alongside theories of cognitive education, cultural heritage education, and visual thinking, offering the opportunity to enhance the study of Buddhist art.

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Appendix

Symbolism of the Iconography

No.	Iconographic Element	Symbolic Meaning
	Symbolism of the Body (Lagshin)	
1	Four heads	The four seasons of the outer (container) world, the four virtues of the inner (sentient) world, and the four primordial Buddhas of the lineage
2	Three eyes	The three times (past, present, future); the third eye symbolizes refuge/liberation
3	Torso	Above the waist up to the main head, the body is blue. From the perspective of the inner world, this symbolizes that the mind has the nature of the supreme, unchanging bliss
4	Legs	The right leg is red and extended; the left leg is white and drawn in. Above the waist, the body is blue. From the perspective of the inner world, this symbolizes that, through the power of meditation, the mother's red drop is gathered downward via the right leg, while the father's white drop is gathered upward via the left leg
5	Soles of the feet	From the outer-world perspective, this symbolizes the 12 months of the year and the full annual cycle as the sun moves closer and recedes. From the inner-world perspective, it symbolizes that a meditator alternates 12 winds through the two nostrils each day, corresponding to the right and left channels
6	12 shoulders	The approach and withdrawal of the sun in the outer world, and the alternation of the 12 winds in the inner world
7	12 upper arms	The 12 months of the outer world and the 12 winds of the inner world
8	24 hands	The 24 hours of the outer world and the 24 winds (upward and downward movement) of the inner world
9	Five fingers	The five elements
10	Finger joints	Each finger has 3 joints; 4 fingers of a hand × 3 = 15; both hands × 10 fingers = 30 joints; multiplied by 12 upper arms = 360; adding 1 for the body and 4 for the heads yields 365. This represents the 365 days of the outer world and the 360 subtle winds of the inner world
11	Yab-Yum (father–mother union)	Yab = the father deity; Yum = the mother deity. The embrace represents the union of method and wisdom, the supreme state of tantric meditation
	Ornaments	
12	Crown	The purification of the five afflictions
13	Earrings	Listening to the Dharma and to the wishes of sentient beings
14	Necklace	Readiness to help beings through the Dharma
15	Upper-arm ornaments	The power of action
16	Bracelets	Generosity / virtuous giving
17	Anklets	Readiness in meritorious action
18	Belt / sash	Upholding the Dharma
19	Crest jewel	Honoring the truth of the Dharma
20	Vajra bracelets	The vajra symbolizes indestructible firmness
21	Tiger-skin loincloth	The suppression of anger
	Implements Held in the Hands	
22	Curved flaying knife (kartika)	Severing afflictions and ignorance
23	Vajra hook	Drawing the minds of beings toward the Dharma
24	Damaru (drum)	The union of emptiness with method and wisdom
25	Prayer beads (mala)	Uninterrupted meditation
26	Four heads of Brahmā	Governing the four directions and the four powers
27	Vajra chain	Binding karma; the firmness of the Dharma
28	Mirror	Mirror-like wisdom
29	Conch	The proclamation of the Dharma; awakening from ignorance
30	Lotus	Purity
31	Wish-fulfilling jewel	The jewel that grants all wishes
32	Vajra lasso	Binding harmful forces
33	Bow	The focused mind

34	Skull cup	Deathless emptiness
35	Shield	Protective wisdom
36	Hadamga (ritual dagger)	Suppressing cosmic forces
37	Bell	Wisdom (emptiness)
38	Vajra	Method; the indestructible nature
39	Sword	The wisdom that cuts through ignorance
40	Three-pronged trident	Overcoming the three poisons
41	Ritual knife (degug)	Severing ego-clinging
42	Arrow	Consciousness directed toward its goal
43	Vajra hook (repeated)	Drawing forth bodhicitta
44	Damaru (repeated)	The union of action and wisdom
45	Hammer	Crushing arrogance
46	Wheel (chakra)	The turning of the Wheel of Dharma
47	Pristine spear	Penetrating the three realms
48	Staff	Support and reliance
49	Axe	Severing the chains of karma
50	Wish-fulfilling jewel (repeated)	The perfection of wisdom
51	Lotus (repeated)	The pure path of enlightenment
52	Vajra lasso (repeated)	The salvation of beings
53	Skull cup (repeated)	The realization of impermanence
Other Elements		
54	Lotus-flower base	The lotus emerges pure from the mud of the swamp; this expresses the idea that a Buddha-nature dwells within the human mind. It also symbolizes the attainment of the pure mind's truth is that one may be born into saṃsāra yet transcend it
55	White disc (moon)	Compassionate bodhicitta
56	Red Bhairava under the right foot and white Ananta under the left foot	From the perspective of the inner world, this symbolizes the gathering of winds within the right and left channels, and the cessation of their uncontrolled flow through those channels
57	Ring of fire	The suppression of the manifold dangers of afflictions
58	Radiance (aureole)	The Dharma-body