



Photo by Nurha de Souza

TORMAS IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

BY LAMA THARCHIN
RINPOCHE

Arising out of compassion for all beings, Buddhas from the past and present have given limitless spiritual practices designed to help sentient beings end their suffering and awaken to their true enlightened nature. These practices include an array of potent tantric Buddhist meditation techniques, which make use of sacred elements such as mandalas, forms of wisdom deities, mantras, mudra (hand gestures), and sacred substances such as tormas.

Tormas represent the awakened mind of the Buddha and through our connection with them our own Buddha mind can be awakened. Each torma's exact shape, proportion, and color arise from the wisdom minds of the Buddhas. Therefore, its sublime material form facilitates spiritual practice and accomplishment. Tormas are said to purify ignorance, and when ignorance is purified what remains is Buddha's awakened mind, also known as the Dharmakaya, the body of ultimate enlightenment. Tormas are commonly used by tantric Buddhist practitioners, yet their benefits reach beyond to anyone who wishes to bring the enlightened energy of the Buddhas into their environment.

While it is most common to use tormas on a shrine for spiritual practice, they can also be used to accumulate positive energy in the home or simply appreciated as spiritual art. Tormas are believed to bring about spiritual wisdom, but also attract other

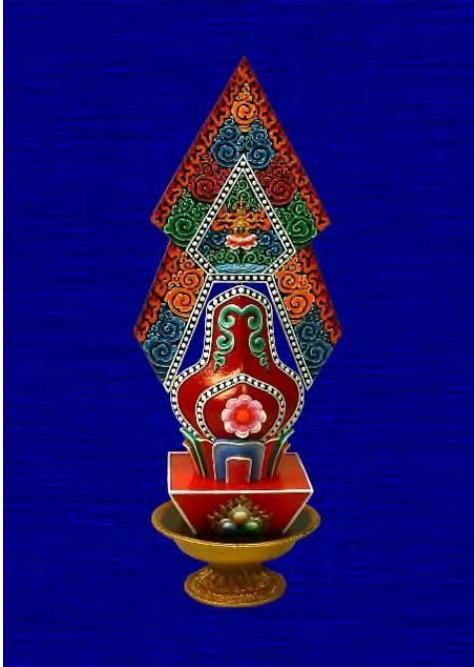
beneficial conditions such as increased wealth, success, improved health, and overall protection from harm and negativity.

When one uses a torma in spiritual practice, the material substances making up the torma become extremely powerful. This quality was acknowledged and highly prized in Tibet where, for example, when someone would finish a three-year or other intensive practice retreat, the torma from their practice mandala was considered very powerful and precious. Tormas were so prized for their blessing power that laypeople would make great effort to obtain a portion of old tormas removed from the monasteries. Traditionally, a piece of torma might be put in a store room or treasure vase as a support for enhancing wealth. Also, keeping part of a torma close to one's body was considered to offer protection from injury by weapons, sickness, negative influence, obstacles and other hazards. Sometimes a piece of torma would be burned as a healing substance for those with physical or mental illness. There was also the practice of steeping a piece of torma in water and sprinkling it on the fields to result in a good harvest. Because the benefits were considered to be so vast, everyone was eager to obtain some of these blessed substances.

Tormas are traditionally made by blending barley flour and sacred ingredients to form dough that is then shaped into a specific style and decorated with ornaments made from butter. Another method is to make tormas from a precious alloy blend of gold, silver, and copper. In the case of these tormas, created by Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, we have used modern materials, particularly resin, to construct the outer shape and ornaments.

Regardless of how the torma's outer form is made, all of the tormas created by Lama Tharchin Rinpoche contain substances personally blessed by him. The auspicious Lha-Gya Tor-Chik (Main Support) torma's traditional form contains a copper chamber filled with numerous blessed articles. For example, small paper scrolls containing prayers and the principal mantras of the three roots (Lama, Yidam Deity, and Dakini) and oath-bound dharma protectors are placed upright within the chamber. These prayers and mantras have been carefully written and supervised to rule out any mistakes from human error. They are written on paper that has been consecrated and colored with a liquid tincture made from sacred substances such as saffron, and the traditional six excellent medicinal ingredients. Also placed in the chamber are five substances known to draw in forms of spiritual accomplishment and five substances which can illuminate wisdom (these substances are comprised of special grains, incense, medicines, and jewels). In addition to these, there are other sacred items such as pills formed from consecrated substances that were retrieved from concealed spiritual treasures (terma) and materials which past spiritual masters had prepared for their own tormas.

One can see that tormas, which are filled with a vast array of sacred substances and whose shape was prescribed by the Buddhas, offer a potent form of spiritual blessing that can enhance one's spiritual practice and one's life.



THE MAIN SUPPORT TORMA:

LHA-GYA TOR-CHIK

This powerful torma is mentioned in Buddhist tantras and meditation texts, where it is called *The Resplendent Torma, A Blazing Jewel, Source of Desires' Fulfillment*, and is also known as "The One Torma that Represents a Hundred Wisdom Deities" (Lha-Gya Tor-Chik). Practical instructions for constructing this torma's shape were based upon a tradition beginning in the original Nyingma School's large monastic center known as Glorious Orgyen Mindroling. Specific directions for its appearance were given by the sublime master and treasure revealer Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje (Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche), who was the incarnate regent of the great master Padmasambhava as well as the head of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. Lama Tharchin Rinpoche personally learned to create this style of torma from Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche himself and received the definitive instructions from him.

Traditionally the Lha-Gya Tor-Chik is placed in the center of the Buddhist shrine (between the wisdom medicine and rakta offerings if your shrine is more elaborate). It may also be used as a blessing substance and set anywhere in a respectful position on one's shrine or in one's home.



THE OFFERING TORMAS: PEACEFUL FOOD, WRATHFUL FLOWER, AND WRATHFUL FOOD OFFERINGS

The three offering tormas (pictured above left to right: peaceful food, wrathful food, wrathful flower) may be used individually or together in a traditional manner on one's shrine as part of the peaceful and wrathful offerings. They can also be kept in the home to be appreciated as spiritual art or used to draw in positive energy into one's life and living environment.

On the Buddhist shrine we use these tormas for the traditional outer peaceful and inner wrathful offerings. Peaceful offerings are pleasing to the senses and thus enhance positive qualities. They create positive feelings, are an antidote to miserliness, and therefore accumulate merit. Wrathful offerings are related to the tantric tradition and emphasize the accumulation of wisdom. Through offering wrathful substances, our conceptual limitations of accepting what is perceived as positive and rejecting what is perceived as negative are liberated.

The outer peaceful offerings include drinking water, foot-washing water, flowers, incense, light, perfumed water, food, and music (offered by playing musical instruments rather than as a substance on the shrine according to Nyingma tradition). The inner wrathful offerings represent wrathful forms of these same substances. Among our three tormas, the peaceful food offering is represented by a torma called Zhiway Zhalsé; the wrathful flower offering by a torma called Wangpo Métok; and the wrathful food offering by a torma called Drakpö Zhalsé.

USING TORMAS AS AN OFFERING

In our home, we can create a shrine as a support for our spiritual practice to provide a focus for our attention and devotion, leading us to awareness of our own enlightened mind. Making offerings at our shrine is a technique common to all Buddhist vehicles to reduce the afflictive emotions and increase wisdom and compassion. Offerings made to the Buddhas and enlightened beings help us to release our grasping and selfish minds. Buddhists consider outer phenomena and the inner mind as inseparable. Therefore, making offerings naturally frees the grasping mind, and unties the ego's self-serving knot.

The Buddhas are not viewed as something external from ourselves. Rather, we recognize them as none other than our own pure intrinsic nature. Through this practice of making offerings to the Buddhas, our mind's outer display becomes pure light phenomena rather than our usual heavy concrete phenomena that is a projection of our mind. It is this mind's dualistic projection which causes suffering. Instead, all outer phenomena are experienced as pure, harmless, beneficial, and effortlessly positive. When we experience our outer surroundings as a pure land, then all outer phenomena can remind us of our own inner pure awareness nature. Offerings made with this understanding become a sacred support for the realization of all the Buddhas' pure enlightened body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities. Releasing oneself from clinging to this little "I" who is always trying to get something for itself creates incredible merit. It leads beyond the dualistic concepts of "good" and "bad" and awakens our pure, stainless wisdom mind. In this way, offering creates virtue because selfishness lessens and clinging decreases, therefore transforming selfishness into the wisdom of selflessness.

USING A TORMA IN VAJRAYANA BUDDHIST MEDITATION PRACTICE

First, during meditation on the torma's form, we perceive the torma as a wisdom deity. We visualize and meditate on the torma according to meditation techniques described in specific dharma texts. We accomplish these practices with the knowledge that all appearances, sounds, and awareness have the nature of the three vajras (enlightened body, speech and mind). This meditation leads to the uncovering of the ultimate deity of the nature of reality - the self-arisen wisdom of great exaltation that dwells primordially within us; and to the attainment of enlightenment within the youthful vase body's inner, original pure luminosity. This purity of the abiding inner nature constitutes the completion of a great cultivation of wisdom, the accomplishment of our own goal - enlightenment's sublime, formless body.

Second, while making offerings we perceive the torma itself to be a desirable offering. Using the torma as a tangible support for our visualization, the offerings we arrange produce inconceivable mentally emanated desirable offerings, presented by innumerable offering goddesses who multiply to fill the expanse of limitless space. These goddesses make offerings to the sacred mandala deities, and the deities' minds are filled with uncontaminated pleasure that fills the bounds of the absolute expanse. With this in mind, we sustain the knowledge that ultimately any phenomena appearing within the entirety of oceans of realms of existence, such as these desirable offerings, do not transcend the miraculous display of outwardly illuminating wisdom: the nature of reality that is nowhere existent but appears everywhere. An offering of these appearing forms, uncontaminated by the attachment of grasping, is the holy, ultimate, supreme offering. This purity of abiding appearances constitutes the completion of the cultivation of merit, the effortless spontaneous accomplishment of magnificent benefit to others.

Third, we perceive the torma as spiritual accomplishment. The torma, imagined as inseparable from the deity, melts into light and dissolves into us. This blesses our body, speech, and mind as the three vajras (enlightened body, speech and mind). Thinking that we attain the perfect power of every form of common and supreme accomplishment, we sustain our meditation on the deity of ultimate reality's abiding nature.

We use these three perceptions while making and filling the torma, and also while doing meditation practice with the torma. A torma correctly made in this way equals a treasure of jewels that provides all one desires. Regarding this particular torma, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche states that its style has been meticulously handed down through the ages and he has personally seen and received instruction in this style in its unmistakable definitive version.



ABOUT LAMA THARCHIN RINPOCHE

The artist, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, is the current tenth lineage holder of the largest Tibetan yogi sect, the Repkong Ngak-mang. This family lineage of awareness holders was originally based at Repkong, the great monastery of tantric knowledge in the eastern Tibetan region of Amdo. Lama Tharchin Rinpoche trained and gained experience in the ultimate great mysteries of the three inner tantras of Buddhism as well as the relative forms of training such as song, mandala design, dance, and sacred art. In Tibet, he studied under Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche's main ritual lama, Kushab Gyurme Dorje, and served as the principal shrine attendant (chöpön) in the protector temple at Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche's residence for a period of seven years. There he was solely responsible for creating and attending to all the regularly offered tormas. After escaping Tibet for India in 1960, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche came to Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche's center in Kalimpong where he again served as the main shrine attendant at the Ngakpa Tsok Khang (yogi temple) at Rigdzin Pema Ga-Tsal. He also taught at Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche's Ani Tsok Khang (nuns' temple). Later settling at Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche's seat in Orissa, India, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche served as gekö (head disciplinarian) and trained the shrine attendants, as well as fulfilling other duties.

Lama Tharchin Rinpoche's exemplary torma work is internationally acclaimed. He has honored requests for his tormas in Buddhist centers in India, Nepal, Japan, Taiwan, America, and around the world. Rinpoche continues to teach the art of torma-making to his own students and retreatants.