

## THE DARK OF THE MOON: DHARMA PROTECTORS

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We are once again in those dark days just before the New Moon which used to be called the 'Devil's Days' in Europe and the 'Dharma Protector Days' in Tibet. I first saw the Tibetan dharma protectors as a child while leafing through copies of National Geographic looking for photos of half-naked women. Being raised as one of five boys (with no sisters), how is a kid to learn?

The dharma protectors are those fierce-looking deities that we find in Tibetan thangka paintings and sometimes in statues. They are terrifying to see and typically are shown holding human skullcaps in their hands overflowing with brains and blood. What is that all about I wondered? And why are these three days of the dark of the Moon called dharma protector days? Are these dark days of the New Moon like Halloween, a time when all the ghouls come out?

The Dharma Protectors (Dharmapalas in Sanskrit) are not there to terrify us, but to protect us, and like their name suggests they are there to protect the dharma, to guard all that is true and most worthy in us and in life itself. They are not outside in the dark of night looking in to frighten us like some demons, but rather they are inside with us looking out, protecting us by protecting the precious dharma in us.

As for the blood and skullcaps, this is nothing more than a representation of the process of impermanence and death itself that awaits each of us, a process we vainly attempt to ignore, but one that sooner or later we will have to meet head on. It is when we break down once in a while enough to admit or even allow the fact of impermanence to reach us... that we find the dharma, the moment's heartbreak when our ego shatters and we begin to find our true way once again. In those moments we wake up from who knows how long a sleep or distraction?

I like to tell myself that impermanence is the smelling salts of the dharma. Even a whiff of our own mortality is usually enough to wake us up to what is really important in our lives.

The Dharmapalas are those fierce truths that Mother Nature displays to us all the time, truths that if we will but look at (and that when acknowledged) manage to tame us, subdue our wild tendencies, and make willing subjects of us all. We don't break nature's laws; they break us.

The Dharmapalas protect the dharma (our true life path) from being weakened or watered down in any way. They represent truths (like death and impermanence) and stand fierce, treating all living beings with equanimity. Mother Nature plays no favorites and the Dharmapalas are one with and an expression of nature's own immutable laws.

As for their bloodthirsty appearance? Yes, the gateway to death can be terrifying and is filled with blood and the dying. It is the ring-pass-not of the western occultists, the fierce Dharmapalas to which we each must submit, be tamed by, and pass through sooner or later.

The true nature of our mind is inviolate, surrounded by a ring of fierce Dharmapalas that, like the force of nature herself, shield and protect the living truth. We cannot know the nature of our mind except by burning off the dross of whatever obscures our seeing it. The Dharmapalas appear fierce, but their fire burns nothing but our own obscurations and delusions. They don't

stand in the way of our awakening, but rather insure that we will always have that opportunity.

The New Moon is on Saturday December 24, 2011 at 1:07 PM EST, which makes Christmas a "new time."