

TOUGH LOVE -- THE FIERCE DHARMA PROTECTORS

In Tibetan Buddhism, what are called the fierce wrathful deities (Dharma Protectors, Dharmapalas) stand out as scary. The key word here, IMO, is “wrath,” and even that word is defined in numerous ways.

My understanding of “wrath” (and the way I use this word), it is not about anger, but righteousness or cosmic justice – the persistence and endurance of truth. Simply put, the truth lasts longer than anything else. It’s as close to permanence as we get. The truth is the future, because when everything else dies out, the truth will still be there.

The fierce Dharmapala Mahakala is often cited as being the wrathful form of Chenresik (Avalokiteshvara), the Bodhisattva of kindness and compassion. They are two ends of the same stick or what is called “connate.”

Mahakala comes from the word “Maha” meaning great and the word “Kala” meaning time or death. And no, it does not translate as have a “great time”. LOL. My first dharma teacher used to spell and play with words. And with the word “funeral,” he would rearrange the letters and say “real fun.” Then he would laugh. So, perhaps Mahakala is like that. The Kalachakra stands for the “wheel of time,” so Mahakala is something like the “Great Death.” The Tibetans simply call Mahakala “Nagpo Chenpo” meaning “Great Black One.” Another Tibetan word for these deities is Gönpö, which means “protector.” You get the idea.

Kindness and compassion are the key; if we stray too far from the truth, the wrathful deities rise up in proportion to our error and warn us that we are off-course. Eventually, if we continue to persist in the wrong direction from truth, the protectors will trim or cut away our excess. And that can be painful. They are the protectors from error, so to speak.

Just as pain is the way the body tells us something is wrong, wrathful deities like the protector Mahakala protect us from going too far from the truth. As my first dharma teacher used to say about natural laws like the law of gravity: “We don’t break nature’s laws; they break us.” That’s dharmapalas.

In a “trim” router, any wood that is not within the form of the bit is trimmed away. I sometimes think of the protectors like that. If I get out-of-line, to the degree I stray from my own internal truth, sooner or later that degree or error must be rectified and removed. In that case, we are living on borrowed time.

In fact, the fierce face of Mahakala was historically so indigenous to the nomadic Tibetans that it was referred to as

the “lord of the tent,” because every tent had a Mahakala mask hanging in it or at the doorway protecting the place.

As mentioned, just as pain is a kindness of the body to keep us aware, so the fierce Mahakala protector marks the ring-pass-not or the “extremes” beyond which we cannot go with impunity, without serious consequences.

And so, it is just a hop, skip, and a jump from Mahakala as protector of all beings, keeping us safe, to Mahakala as a protector that warns and wards away “evil” or error in whatever form it arises or exists.

These fierce protectors are intended to be, in their wrath, more fierce than any “evil” could ever be and thus their appearance. “Evil back-off” or suffer the consequences. Again, these are “protectors” of us and have never harmed a single being, but only serve to keep them safe from falling into error. No doubt, however, that it represents some tough love.

