

# INTERVENTIONS

Theme for this Issue: Cultural Translations of Buddhism in Asia



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION**

**Volume 6:2**

**(ISSN 2454 -9495)**

**July 2025**

## **Understanding the ‘Wrathful Compassion’: A Reflection upon the Narratives and Forms of Yamāntaka**

**\*\*Tathagata Sagar Pal**

**Abstract:** *Karuṇā* (compassion) is one of the important cornerstones of the Mahāyāna consciousness. According to the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha not only has the wisdom of insight into the state of things but also the compassion for all suffering sentient beings. The emphasis on the cultivation of compassion, along with the perfection of *prajñā*, is deemed as essential for the emergence of the bodhicitta. This altruistic idealization has led to the exaltation of the bodhisattvas in the Mahāyāna doctrine. The bodhisattvas are the ones who epitomize the cardinal principle of *mahākaruṇā* and do not accept *nirvāṇa* for only themselves. Rather, they pledge themselves for the salvation of all, making the bodhisattva path as the supreme way in the Mahāyāna belief and leading to the popularization of the Dhamma. In the Mahāyāna pantheon, therefore, one finds the significance of the celestial bodhisattvas like Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī, who have many forms and display miraculous powers. Their forms, however, undergo changes in Vajrayāna, which adds esoteric meanings to the manifestations. One characteristic of the Vajrayāna pantheon is that there are wrathful deities, including the bodhisattvas. This research would like to concentrate upon Yamāntaka, the wrathful appearance of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of transcendental wisdom. It would first seek to find the significance of *karuṇā* in Buddhism and then, relate to its embodiment by Yamāntaka. While the wrathful deities are often construed to be ‘demonic,’ this essay would try to locate the symbolic significance of Yamāntaka’s form and how it can be associated with the Buddhist doctrine. It would take into account the concerned texts on Yamāntaka and show how the exploits of the deity can be held as an extension of the bodhisattva’s compassion.

**Keywords:** *compassion, wrathfulness, Vajrayāna, demonic, exploits.*

### **Introduction**

The doctrine of compassion is deeply embedded in Buddhism from the beginning. It would not be an exaggeration if one identifies compassion as the galvanizing force behind the spread of the Dhamma. In the “Āyācana Sutta” of the *Samuttya Nikāya*, the Buddha, after achieving enlightenment, is shown to be hesitant to teach the doctrines of the Dhamma. Brahmā

Sahampati then implored him to propagate his liberating path; otherwise, the beings would be mired down by the false teachings and the miseries. As Buddha cast his compassionate gaze on the world of the sentient and found those who would be able to realize the profundity of his tenets, he felt an ardent desire to reveal the ‘truth’ for the others’ wellbeing. Such an egalitarian approach is at the heart of Buddhism. It is to be noted that other religions have also placed tremendous importance upon this noble, virtuous concept. Patañjali, in the *Yoga Sūtras*, has referred to compassion as one of the philosophical foundations of yoga, purifying the mind and bringing about the stability of energy to ascend to the higher spiritual stages (1.33). For Jains, it is integral to their practice of *ahimsā*. Regarding Buddhism, eminent *ācāryas*, as part of their appreciation of compassion, have also contemplated on its dimensions to be pursued by the adepts. The compassionate approach, which emphasizes the need to respond to the sufferings of all beings, then has become a core value in all Buddhist philosophical schools.

In view of the overwhelming significance attached to it, Buddhist deities are revered as the embodiments of boundless compassion. Due to their expansion of the mind, they have become the symbols of panacea for the ills tormenting the sentient beings. While it is easier to conceptualize the compassionate nature inherent in the peaceful deities, the wrathful deities require more nuanced understanding. In this connection, the present article will be concentrating upon Yamāntaka, the wrathful manifestation of Mañjuśrī. Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of transcendental wisdom, has been accorded one of the highest positions in the Buddhist pantheon. Likewise, Yamāntaka, a deity belonging to the *anuttarayoga tantra*, is no short of feats and legends associated with him. With his tantras believed to be originating in Oḍḍiyāna, the prominence of the deity spread to Tibet, China and Manchuria as well. However, because of his ruthless appearance, there is considerable fear and apprehension surrounding him. This article will delve into the significance of compassion in Buddhist consciousness and try to elucidate the compassionate embodiment by Yamāntaka. For this purpose, his iconography and activities will be analyzed. Since his name suggests connection with Yama, the interreligious interactions will come under the purview of the study.

### **Significance of Compassion**

Compassion (*karuṇā*) is an important cornerstone in the Buddhist consciousness. Among the four divine abidings (*brahmavihāras*), compassion is preceded by loving kindness (*mettā*), which is the mental state of affection that wishes others to be endowed with happiness and the causes of happiness. It is compelling to note that as one searches for infinite happiness, he / she

must identify the causes of suffering. This will, in turn, spur the individual to be compassionate because compassion is the mental state of affection that wishes others to be freed of suffering and the causes of suffering. Buddhism, thus, presents a very systematic method for the cultivation of compassion. When this feeling is accompanied by the meditative concentration of the form realm, it is elevated as the ‘immeasurable compassion.’ By harbouring this excellent, sublime quality, one is freed from the five hindrances: sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*), restlessness and remorse (*uddhaccakukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*). Throughout the *Majjhima Nikāya (MN)*, the *bhikkhus* have been repeatedly instructed to suffuse one quarter of the world with compassionate mind,<sup>i</sup> so that they can be born in the heavenly realm. Meditation on compassion is an effective way to subdue cruelty and hatred towards others, as one reaches the threshold of the awakened state of mind. This has been corroborated by the Buddha in the “Mahārāhulavāda Sutta” of the *MN*: “Rahula, develop meditation on compassion; for when you develop meditation on compassion, any cruelty will be abandoned” (*Teachings 530*). It is, however, necessary to point out that *karuṇā* is opposed to sentimental pity. Unlike sentimental pity’s agenda of self-gratification, compassion is guided by the pure motivation of welfare for others.

In Mahāyāna, *karuṇā* is raised to be one of the cardinal principles of spiritual path, along with *prajñā*. The root problem that troubles the adept in the quest for enlightenment is the self-grasping ignorance, which is complemented by the self-cherishing attitude. That is why, the equal emphasis on wisdom and compassion, to do away with self-grasping ignorance and self-cherishing attitude respectively, has been emphasized by the Mahāyānists. This belief was pursued by the siddhas as well, as evident in the *dohā* by Saraha:

By entering into emptiness but devoid of compassion,  
One will not find the supreme path.  
By meditating upon compassion alone,  
One will not attain liberation, but remain in samsara. (*Blaze 216*)

The later Buddhist theologians, therefore, have been attentive to the cultivation and inculcation of *karuṇā*. When it comes to self-cherishing attitude, it can be categorized into gross and subtle. The gross self-cherishing attitude considers the self to be more important than the others, preventing joy; whereas the subtle one views the self as important by being oblivious to others and thereby limiting the experience of joy. So, there has been the necessity of developing the

perception of equating self and others, with the honing of the ability to feel the suffering in others as if it is one's own. This has been emphasized in Ācārya Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*: "There has been no doubt that those with the nature of compassion/ Regard all those beings (to be same) as themselves" (55). The significance of this approach is seen in one of the techniques for the cultivation of bodhicitta being known as the "Method of Equalizing and Exchanging Self or Others," which has nine steps: a) equalizing self and others, b) reflection on the demerits of cherishing oneself, c) reflection on the merits of cherishing others, d) taking the suffering of others with the emphasis on compassion, e) giving emphasis on others with the expansion on loving kindness, f) actual exchange of self and others, g) special recollection of the kindness of others, h) altruism and i) bodhicitta. The systematic breakdown reveals that without the preparatory stages of deepening others' appreciation, which makes one aware of the inner demons, there is no possibility of imbibing altruistic spirit and generating bodhicitta. However, the concern may arise regarding the 'compassion fatigue.' In "Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva," Gyalsé Thogmay Sangpo has extolled the noble, compassionate deed of embracing the misdeeds of the others even after being harmed without any provocation (*Blaze* 143). The insinuation, in this aspect, has been on 'skilful compassion,' through which any factor that can agitate 'ordinary' people,<sup>ii</sup> should give rise to joy and compassion within the Dhamma adherents. Practice under the watchful eyes of the qualified *gurus*, thus, is deemed essential since it is the *guru* who has insights into the requirements of the disciples and devises appropriate means of accomplishment. Only then, by taking on the suffering for others, one will be helping himself/ herself because it helps him/ her reach the "sorrowless state" (23), as prescribed by Ācārya Śāntideva.

The practice of compassion, in company with wisdom, is heralded as the illuminating light in the aspirant's life. They enable one's perfection of the six *pāramitās* (generosity, morality, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, wisdom), inspiring him/ her to help others navigate through the tempestuous waters of *samsāra* and be the inexhaustible treasure for the poor and destitute. The perfection of these ideals leads to *mahākaruṇā* (universal compassion), which is at the heart of the bodhisattva doctrine. The bodhisattvas, because of their nature of universal compassion, harbours the wish to free all beings from the clutches of suffering. It sets them apart from the śrāvakas and the pratyekabuddhas. The śrāvakas are the ones who listen to the preachings of the Buddha and attain *parinirvāṇa* through right comprehension of the four noble truths, but have not mastered universal compassion. Pratyekabuddhas are self-realizers. Without needing the instructions of the *guru* at every turn,

they have the ability to attain salvation by comprehending the cause and conditions of things, but are not moved for the well-being of the suffering world due to their lack of *mahākaruṇā*. The scope of *mahakaruna* finds its fullest expression in the bodhisattvas, emphasized in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*: “My own self I will place in Suchness [the true way of things], and, so that all the world might be helped, I will place all beings in Suchness, and I will lead to Nirvana the whole immeasurable world of living beings” (qtd. in Snellgrove 62). The bodhisattva, therefore, never seeks final liberation only for personal gain, but for the uplift of the whole world. For this purpose, Śākyamuni Buddha also took numerous births to attain enlightenment and become a Perfect Buddha. In Mahāyāna view, this altruistic aspiration makes the bodhisattvas nobler than the śrāvakas and the pratyekabuddhas. In contrast to earlier schools, the bodhisattva vow, therefore, becomes prescriptive in Mahāyāna theology.

When it comes to ‘wrathful compassion,’ the term might seem to be an oxymoron. But it should not be confused with the anger or hatred that ‘ordinary’ beings experience. Rather, it signifies a transformative energy that can overcome negative emotions and afflictions. This spirit is best embodied in the wrathful deities whose compassion is derived from their feeling of intense emotion and directed to end the suffering of all beings. Wrathful Buddhist deities began to be conceptualized from the sixth century A.D. with the advent of esoteric texts. By matching the outer expression of ruthlessness with the inner essence of compassion, they enfold chaos into sacredness. For the adept, it essentially entails the subversion and transcendence of dualism. The significance of wrathful deities in the Vajrayānī pantheon can be well attested if one looks at how they rose from the attendants of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas to the position of the supreme beings. Significantly, one finds that the ‘peaceful’ bodhisattvas, like Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī, also have their wrathful forms. This is where Yamāntaka comes into play. He is the wrathful emanation of Mañjuśrī whose prominence can be dated from the first century A.D., when *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* portrays Mañjuśrī becoming the interlocutor for Vimalakīrti’s divine exposition after the debate between the two. Yamāntaka’s origin, however, came at a later date. He figures prominently in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (MMK) (c. sixth-seventh century A.D.) where he is depicted as an attendant of Mañjuśrī, signifying the early phase of the growing stature of the deity. Etymologically, the name ‘Yamāntaka’ means the one who has put an end to Yama, suggesting the possible connections between the two deities. In fact, one of the epithets of Yama is “Antaka” (The End). The article, therefore, would first give a brief overview of Yama in Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

### **Yama in Hindu and Buddhist Traditions**

Yama has been mentioned from the Vedic Age itself. He and his twin sister, Yamī, are born to Vivasvat, the Sun God and Saranyū. In the Ṛg Veda, the hymn 10.14 refers to the sacrifice performed to Yama for leading the deceased's soul. There, Yama has been mentioned separately from the gods and the ancestors. While it indicates his paramountcy in the rite of the dead, it is also tied to the mythological narrative of Yama being the first mortal who courted death and found the path from the earth to the underworld. Consequently, he took upon the role to lead the next mortals along the way to the underworld, becoming the ruler of the departed. So, he is both the ancestor of humans and a god. In that hymn, Yama has also been extolled as the "King" who upholds cosmic law and order, a role which has undoubtedly influenced his epithet of 'Dharmarāja.' So, from the beginning, one can see efforts to depict Yama as a guardian, a wise teacher. This is more clearly portrayed in the episode of Naciketā, as narrated in the *Kaṭhapaniṣad*. When Naciketā went to Yama, to uphold his father's inadvertent vow, what followed is an enriching discussion on the *atman-brahman* that trumps death. Significantly, the gods are also revealed to be unaware of the unity of the nature of the true self and the supreme spirit, the realization of which leads one to the highest transcendental state. The elevation of Yama's authority in this instance makes it clear that the Vedic texts have hardly presented him in a malevolent light. Rather, he is shown to be an excellent judge of character. The secrets were revealed to Naciketā only after the young sage rejected the material pleasures offered by the god. It essentially entails the path of the Dharma where one must always be immune to the worldly temptations.

The ethical, dharmic trait of Yama has been delineated in the Mahābhārata as well. During the Pāṇḍavas' exile in the forests, Yama, once in the guise of the *yakṣa*, enquired Yudhiṣṭhira regarding the nature of the Dharma and the ways of its execution in one's life (Volume 3: "Canto 311- Araneya Parva Continued"). He further tested Yudhiṣṭhira's virtue by asking him to choose only one of his brothers who could be brought back to life, thereby situating the intricacy of the Dharma in personal contexts. Even during the *mahāprasthānam*, he, in the guise of a dog, accompanied Yudhiṣṭhira to probe his moral integrity. While Indra tried to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira to leave the dog, the Pāṇḍava King's refusal to leave the loyal creature out of his compassion earned his first entry to heaven. The Mahābhārata has interpreted the Dharma by relating it to *karma* that must be performed according to one's social standing.

That is why, Duryodhana was seen enjoying the bliss of heaven before the Pāṇḍavas because his actions as a warrior stemmed from the adherence to the oaths he had taken as the king. Even Yudhiṣṭhira, because of his one half-truth to Droṇācārya, had to visit hell and take the pledge to stay with his loved ones to alleviate their miseries before passing the final test and ascending to heaven permanently. Yama, being the custodian of the departed, became involved in this rubric of *svadharma* (one's own dharma) and the resultant *mokṣa* to be appreciated after the span of the mortal life comes to an end.

In early Buddhism, the notion of *karma* according to Buddhist interpretation might have been in conflict with any judgement given by an external being. In the “Devadūta Sutta” of the *MN*, an individual who has ill-treated his parents, elder, ascetics, was taken upon his death to Yama by the wardens of hell. When Yama asked whether he had been mindful of the divine messages in light of birth, deterioration, sickness, worldly retribution and death, that person acknowledged his failure to consider the consequences of his deplorable actions. He was accordingly incarcerated in hell (*Teachings* 1030). Yama here appears as a sympathetic onlooker who does not interfere with the karmic law, implying the subtlety of his adaptation by Buddhism. His position as the ruler of the hells, however, has remained secure. His benevolence has likewise been acknowledged as the protector of the travelling merchants (*Mahāvastu* 81). In Tibetan Buddhism, Yama is one of the eight Dharmapālas who were put under oath by Padmashambhava in the eighth century A.D. to protect the Buddhist faith. On one hand, it indicates the non-Buddhist origin of Yama who was later incorporated within the Buddhist pantheon. On the other hand, there is the notion of coercion implied in the narrative as Padmashambhava, who is believed to have subdued the Tibetan malignant spirits and paved the way for the foundation of Buddhism. This motif of coercion, relating to Yama, will also come up in the origin of Yamāntaka.

### **The Origin of Yamāntaka**

The *MMK* proves to be a valuable asset in ennobling the actions and rituals of Yamāntaka. In that text, it has been stated:

The mantra Lord of Wrath,  
Known by the name of Yamāntaka,  
Can swiftly summon and strike  
Even the great being Yama. (52.138)

This triumph of Yamāntaka over the Lord of Death has been narrated in a symbolic Tibetan legend. According to that narrative, an ascetic, after being told that he would attain *nirvāṇa* after meditating for fifty years, was doing so in a cave. When he was nearing its completion, two robbers pursued a buffalo to the cave and cut off its head. They ignored the ascetic's plea and decapitated him too. The yogin, furious because of his failure to reach the goal, came back to life through his siddhi. He put the head of the buffalo over his torso and killed the robbers. Driven by his ego, he, now known as Yama, began to terrorize all of Tibet, whose inhabitants prayed to Mañjuśrī for protection. Mañjuśrī, out of his compassion, appeared in a terrible form similar to Yama, only ten times more ferocious and powerful, and came to be known as Yamāntaka. After a long and fierce battle, Yama was finally trounced.

The question may emerge why Yama has been subjected to humiliating defeat, when he has been shown to be at best equivocal in the previous section. For this purpose, there is the need to understand the connotation of death, and the corresponding perception of Yama in Buddhism. Death is one of the miseries inflicted by *samsāra*. In the *bhāva-cakra*, ageing and death, symbolized by a corpse, constitute the last of the twelve links of dependent origination. Further, the demonic figure holding the wheel has been viewed as “the lord of death” (*Blaze* 332), representing death and impermanence of life. Just as one, imprisoned by the demon, cannot escape from the wheel; if he/ she remains under the sway of afflictions and contaminated karmas, there is no possibility of respite from the incessant cycle of births and deaths. To be free from these endless tears and fears, one needs to awaken the Buddha nature by severing ignorance and cleansing the mental defilements. That is why, at the bottom of the Wheel of Life, one finds the verses: “Just as an elephant in the midst of huts, / Destroy the host of the lord of death” (*Blaze* 333). Yamāntaka symbolizes that force which jolts the individual to realize the true nature of the mind. This is evident in the Tibetan Yama subjugation tale which is a metaphor of Yamāntaka decimating self-grasping ignorance and self-centred attitude, that were unchecked in the yogin. That is why the yogin suffered from inappropriate attention, gross afflictions, and contaminated karmas, inflicting misery on everybody, including himself.

Yama has also been associated with Māra. Asaṅga, in the *Śrāvakabhūmi*, has mentioned the four Māras: a) Skandha Māra: generating the illusion of the self and the attachment to the five aggregates (form, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, consciousness); b) Kleśa Māra: instigating corruptions like greed, hatred, and ignorance; c) Mṛtyu Māra: being the cause

of death; and d) Devapūtra Māra: causing the attachment to pleasure (qtd. in Wayman 113). These Māras that put up obstacles to the quest for enlightenment by tempting and leading one astray, impose four metaphysical values of death, with the Mṛtyu Māra symbolizing death itself that cuts short one's precious human birth and instigates fear of impermanence. The correlation between Māra and Yama is also evident in the concept of the Three Yamas, as given in the *Vimalaprabhā*. The External Yama corresponds to Devapūtra Māra, the Personal Yama corresponds to Skandha Māra and Mṛtyu Māra, and the Concealed Yama can be related to Kleśa Māra (qtd. in Wayman 126). By conquering Yama, Yamāntaka has essentially been correlated with the Buddha who rejected the temptations posited by Māra and achieved enlightenment. When Yamāntaka is believed to fulfil the aspiration of overcoming death, it has nothing to do with conventional immortality of life. It rather implies the realization of emptiness of the inherent self and the obliteration of attachment, preparing the path for Buddhahood.

### **The Iconography of Yamāntaka**

The iconographies of the wrathful deities are undoubtedly interesting. Adorned with bone ornaments and weapons, they present a different picture from the usual conception of benevolent deities, often leading to misconceptions. This same problem can be observed regarding Buddhism also. Dr. Shashank Shekhar Sinha, in his book, *Casting the Buddha* (2024), has drawn attention to how the English translation of Aśvaghoṣa's *Vajrasūcī* in 1839 and the publication of Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* in 1879 fuelled the engagement of the West with Buddhism (285). The initial European fascination with Buddhism, however, was riddled with the misinterpretation of tantrism which did not fit into their paradigm of 'virtuous' doctrine. This can be seen in L. Austine Waddell's *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism: With Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology, and in Its Relation to Indian Buddhism* (1895) where Tibetan Buddhism has been equated with devil worship and the pantheon has been characterized as "hideous creations of Tāntrism" (131). That is why, the sympathetic iconographic treatment with careful attention to its philosophical implications is necessary.

The iconographic difference between Mañjuśrī and Yamāntaka is certainly startling. Unlike Mañjuśrī's popular representation as the resplendent 'Divine Youth,' Yamāntaka is depicted in a terrifying form. There are several forms of the deity. In the image given below, Yamāntaka has a pot-bellied bluish black body, with nine faces, thirty-four hands and sixteen legs. The main face is that of a black buffalo with two sharp blue horns and fire blazing from

their tips. Above it, is the face of red Hayagrīva and at the top, there is the yellow face of slightly wrathful Mañjuśrī, crowned with a topknot. The faces to the right are yellow, blue and red; and those to the left are grey, white and black. The hair blazing upward is brown coloured. The deity is seen wearing a garland of fifty moist human heads strung together with human intestines. His body is adorned with *pañca mudrās* (necklace, bracelets, earrings, crown, girdle) and smeared with blue ash burned from human bone. The breast ornament is formed by two snakes crossing over the right and left shoulders, with their heads tied to their tails. The hands are seen wielding a multitude of weapons and ritual implements. Yamāntaka is depicted as standing in the *ālīḍha* posture upon a sun disc and a multi-coloured lotus. Underneath his right legs, one notices the prostate bodies of Brahmā, Indra, Viṣṇu and Rudra. Kumāra, Ganeśa, Candra and Sūrya are treaded upon by his left legs. Various animals and birds are also present in the image. Under the right feet of the deity, there are a human being, a buffalo, a bull, a donkey, a camel, a dog, a sheep and a fox. Similarly, a vulture, an owl, a crow, a parrot, a hawk, a kite, a mynah and a swan can be found under his left feet.



Fig.: Yamāntaka

Taken from: “Destroyer of Death Yamantaka,” *Buddha Weekly*.

For a non-practitioner, this iconography might present Yamāntaka as demonic. But each of these features are deeply symbolic. The nine faces represent the nine limbs of scripture which help one to reach the definitive end. The two horns represent the two levels of truth: relative and ultimate. They are embodied in the thirty-seven harmonies of enlightenment, symbolized in the thirty-four arms, together with body, speech and mind. The sixteen legs refer to the realization of the sixteen types of emptiness of the ultimate truth which are pursued by all adepts. The human being, along with the animals, signify the attainment of eight common siddhis, e.g., the fox specifies the prevention of illness. On the other hand, the birds stand for superior powers, like the hawk representing the ability of travelling anywhere. Even the objects wielded in the hands cannot be merely dismissed. E.g., the flayed skin in the first two hands points to the destruction of ignorance. It again brings to everyone's attention how each detail of Yamāntaka's iconography resonates with Buddhist doctrine.

A significant facet of Yamāntaka's iconography and narrative is his connection with the Hindu deities, starting with Yama. Professor Sthaneshwar Timalsina, in his recent lecture on "Diversifying Indian Philosophy," has stressed upon the need for understanding differences, about how the philosophical debate between Hindus and Buddhists brought about assimilation of ideas, redefinition of categories; while, at the same time, maintaining the distinctiveness of the core ideas ("6th Annual" 58:50-1:00:32). The association between the Śaiva kāpālika tantras and the Buddhist anuttarayoga tantras have been noted by several philosophers. Such cultic exchange is clearly evident in the case of Yamāntaka who is shown surpassing the Hindu deities. Noteworthy in this context is that even when Yama is conquered, he is placed in the *maṇḍala* of Yamāntaka, pointing to the process of Buddhist adaptation and conversion of the Hindu divinities. In Yamāntaka's *sādhana*, he has been addressed as "Dharmaraja," implying the Buddhist acknowledgement of his virtuous nature given in the Hindu scriptures. The devotees have been asked to pray and make offerings to him who has been characterized as the representation of "the dharma protectors, guardians, the heroes, and dakinis of the twenty-four places" (Dharmabhadra 121). Other suppressed Hindu deities, in Yamāntaka's *sādhana*, have been referred to as "arrogant gods" (Dharmabhadra 91), symbolizing different mental obscurations which must be purged to attain enlightenment. Yet, the question remains on the reason for selecting deities from another doctrine. The iconography, here, can be taken as a visual representation of the sectarian conflict. In early medieval India, Hinduism was trying to expand its reach through the composition of the *purāṇas* and activities of the sects like the

pāsupatas. The Buddhists were also troubled by the decline in patronage from mercantile guilds and royal authorities. The triumph of Buddhist deities over their Hindu counterparts, therefore, can be seen as an innovative way to put forth the supremacy of the doctrine and attract more followers.

### **The Exploits of Yamāntaka**

The manifold glorious activities of Yamāntaka have been delineated in the *MMK*. There, it has been stated:

Inconceivable is the activity  
Of Lord of Wrath Yamāntaka, the great being.  
Inconceivable, too, is the range of his power  
And his great display of miracles. (51.51)

According to the descriptions provided by the *MMK*, Yamāntaka is endowed with the ability of “rapid flight and swift coercion” (Linrothe 64). It is notable that Yama, in the Ṛg Veda, has been characterized as the one accessing all corners of the universe and assembling men (10.14.1). When Agni hid in the water to escape his role as the oblation-giver, it was Yama who discovered his whereabouts (Ṛg Veda 10.51.3). Such attributes are possessed by Yamāntaka as well, the enormity of whose power is clearly established by putting him against other suprahuman beings. His *mantra* is shown to summon every being- be it the *nāgas*, the *pisācas*, the *rākṣasas*, the *grahas* or the great *devas*- to listen to the Dhamma teachings. Even the wicked beings of great magical power cannot ignore the might of Yamāntaka and are brought to the Assembly of Pure Abode. His abilities, that cannot be comprehended by the ‘ordinary’ beings, are here revealed to be devoted to the spread of the doctrine. Therefore, for the Dhamma enthusiasts, Yamāntaka is not a source of terror, but a safe refuge where they will be able to devote themselves to the awakening within the body and the mind. His miraculous power has also been extended to the protection and purification of the ground on which the *maṇḍalas* are constructed. Yamāntaka thus commands respect not only from the *sādhakas*, but also from other divine beings. Mañjuśrī, hence, asked him to protect the gathering from any cosmic danger as long as the teaching continues.

Yamāntaka has been endowed with epithets like “krodharāja,” “mahākrodha,” et cetera. However, it is to be noted that his anger is for the sake of upholding the Dhamma only. In the *MMK*, after being assigned the task of guarding the congregation, Yamāntaka let out a terrible roar as a warning so that none dared to transgress the injunction. It has been postulated that in the instances of anybody trying to harm the practitioners, if the *sādhaka* chants the *mantra* of Yamāntaka, terrible misfortune will befall upon the miscreants who will lose their strength, will be paralyzed, or may even die. Even unconscious negative intents are shown to be repelled, thus granting protection against gross and subtle negativities. Yamāntaka’s *sādhana* is therefore most potent during the tumultuous period when the Three Jewels will be at stake, with the wavering of the people’s faith. Interestingly, Yamāntaka’s devotees have to be tender with compassion and devoid of anger so that the deity’s teachings can resonate with all (*Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* 51.56). It implies the transcendental essence of Yamāntaka. It becomes more crucial in light of the *abhicāra* rituals prescribed in the *MMK*. One difference between conventional black magic performed for harming others and the sanctified tantra is that the practitioners are made aware that the *abhicāras* are reserved only for the ‘enemies’ of the Dharma. While Yamāntaka’s great compassion stimulates him to be manifested as a ferocious for the sake of subjugating the wicked beings, his *sādhanā* prompts the practitioners to overcome their ‘mundane’ anger and realize compassionate empathy for all .

Yamāntaka’s activities are, thereby, closely related to the enlightenment-achieving practices. He can therefore be considered as the *krodha-vighnāntaka*, as stated by Rob Linrothe (20). In one Yamāntaka *sādhana* of the Drikung Kagyü lineage, the verses at the beginning make the practitioner aware of the necessity of generating bodhicitta. The *sādhana* is aimed to inculcate one’s faith in the Triple Gem of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha (Stachowski 29). The deity comes to embody the overwhelming power of the Buddha mind, with the assertion that all beings are Yamāntaka. The implication of the innate *tathāgatagarbha* strengthens the equation of the Buddha and Yamāntaka because the true nature that all sentient beings are imbued with is considered to be that of the Buddha, from the perspective of this *sādhana*. His practice is then believed to convey the blessings of all Buddhas, bodhisattvas, yidams, gurus, *ḍākinīs*, and every class of divine beings.

## **Conclusion**

For Buddhists, compassion is not a mere fleeting emotion, but a state of being. Yamāntaka brings irresistible force to this compassion and becomes the catalyst of transcendence. The

wrathful deities were a significant paradigm in Tantric Buddhism. Yamāntaka is representative of this group, whose ‘grotesque’ representation has generated considerable notoriety. An anecdote reveals that the 37th American President, Richard Nixon, perceived the Tibetans as the demon-propitiators upon seeing the image of the deity (“Destroyer”). It underscores the need to go beyond the Western dualistic symbolism that harbours fixed notions of the divine and the demonic. Yamāntaka’s wrathfulness serves as his implement, removing the inner obstacles to enlightenment (anger, sloth, greed) as well as the outer projections to harm the adepts. His efforts to establish beings in the light of transcendent knowledge and Dhamma are born of his compassion. The cult of Yamāntaka is also a testament to the inter-religious dialogues that enriched and diversified the respective streams. The adaptations and appropriations, while reflecting the tension between the groups, nevertheless suggest a time when sectarian boundaries were rather fluid in India.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> According to the *MN*, the mind, imbued with each of the four immeasurables, is to pervade one quarter of the world respectively, thereby completely encompassing it. It will result in the world being free from ill will and hostility.

<sup>ii</sup> In the Buddhist framework, ‘ordinary’ beings are the ones who have not realized emptiness directly.

## References

*The Blaze of Non-Dual Bodhicittas: A Manual for Study, Reflection and Meditation on Bodhicitta and the Wisdom of Emptiness*. Tibet House, 2019.

*The Complete Mahabharata*. Edited by Ramesh Menon, Rupa Publications, 2009.

“Destroyer of Death Yamantaka: Buffalo-headed Vajrabhairava, supremely wrathful Yidam manifestation of Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom.” *Buddha Weekly*, <https://buddhaweekly.com/yamantaka-destroyer-death-vajrabhairava-wrathful-dharamapala-heruka-manifestation-manjushri-buddha-wisdom/#lee-kane>. Accessed 23.07.25.

Dharmabhadra, Ngulchu, and Losang Lungtog Tenzin Trinley. *The Roar of Thunder:*

- Interventions Section, Caesurae: Poetics of Cultural Translation, Vol 6: 2 Yamantaka Practice & Commentary.* Translated by David Gonzalez, Wisdom Publications, 2021.
- Kaṭhōpaniṣad: A Dialogue with Death.* Commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, Chinmaya Prakashan, 2018.
- Linrothe, Rob. *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art.* Shambhala, 1999.
- The Mahāvastu (Vol. III).* Translated by J. J. Jones, Luzac & Company, 1956.
- The Request: Āyācana Sutta (SN 6:1).* [https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/SN/SN6\\_1.html](https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/SN/SN6_1.html). Accessed 28.05.25.
- The Rig Veda.* Translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith, Forgotten Books, 2008.
- The Root Manual of the Rites of Mañjuśrī.* Translated by Dharmachakra Translation Committee under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2025.
- Acharya Shantideva. *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.* Translated by Stephen Batchelor, Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1979.
- Sinha, Shashank Shekhar. *Casting the Buddha: A Monumental History of Buddhism in India.* Macmillan, 2024.
- “6th Annual International Conference (ONLINE), Caesurae Collective Society: EVENING SESSION, 29/03/25.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Caesurae Collective Society, 29 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43bgvmNc4OE&t=3638s>. Accessed 26.07.25.
- Snellgrove, David. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors.* Shambhala, 2002.
- Stachowski, Olaf. *From Yama to Vajrabhairava: An Overview of the History of the Yamāntaka Tantric Tradition.* Jagiellonian U, 2019.
- Teachings of the Buddha: The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.* Translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Buddhist Publication Society, 1995.
- Waddell, L. Austine. *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism: With Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology, and in Its Relation to Indian Buddhism.* W. H. Allen & Co., 1895.
- Wayman, Alex. “Studies in Yama and Māra.” *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1959, pp. 112-131. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24646158>. Accessed 30.06.25.
- Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali with the Exposition of Vyāsa.* Translated by Usharbudh Arya, The Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy of the U.S.A., 1986.



**\*\*Tathagata Sagar Pal** has a Master of Arts in English from University of Hyderabad (2021). His research area includes tantric deities and their iconographic analysis. He has presented papers in several national and international conferences. Presently, he is a Ph.D. scholar at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University.