

The Vajra



Tibetan Cultural Traditions THE VAJRA & THE BELL

Tibetan Symbolism The Vajra

A Lama sits in ritual. In his left hand he holds a bell. There is a powerful resonance emanating from the bell, as the Lama slowly, rhythmically rings it in front of his heart. Never breaking the rhythm, the Lama gracefully moves his right hand, which is holding a vajra at the level of his navel. It is amazing to hear, amazing to feel and amazing to watch. How challenging it must be to move each hand in a different rhythm! And yet, the Lama is meditative, focusing on something beyond the objects he holds in his hand.

Tibetan Buddhist culture is rich with symbolism and meaning. There are many ritual objects used for the purpose of guiding the mind towards spiritual awakening. Of these, the vajra and bell are arguably the most important, characteristic ritual implements.

These two objects are paired together in ceremonies, with the vajra embodying the masculine principle and the bell, or ghanta (*Sanskrit*), embodying the feminine principle. It is the union of these, of male and female, compassion and wisdom, which is necessary for enlightenment.

Both objects are full of elaborate symbolism and metaphorical meaning in every detail of their design. For a more complete description, a great resource is *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, by Robert Beer. Here, we will simply explore the broader symbolism of these beautiful ritual objects.

The vajra (*Sanskrit*) or dorje (*Tibetan*) is a powerful symbol in Buddhist Tantra. In fact, Tantra is also referred to as Vajrayana, which means Vajra Vehicle. The Sanskrit word vajra translates to both "diamond-like" and "thunderbolt" and the Tibetan word dorje means "noble stone."

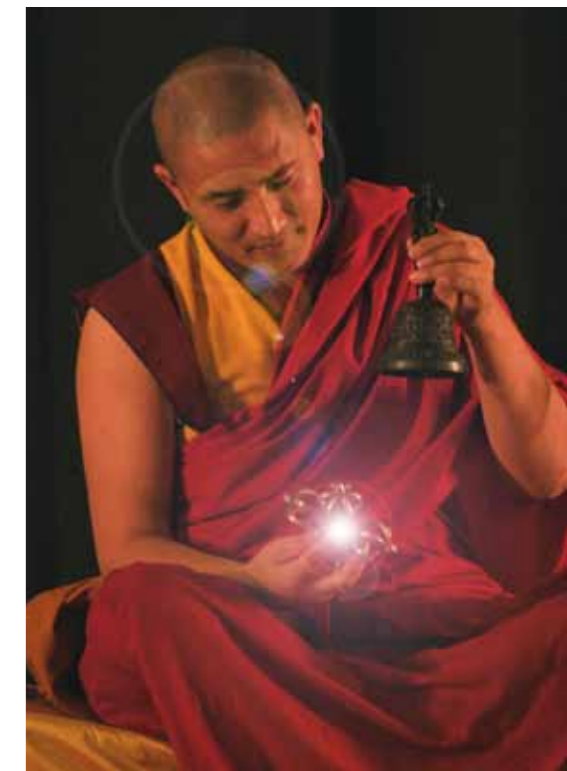
The diamond is the ultimate symbol of indestructibility, of eternal strength. It is able to cut through any other material, but cannot itself be cut or destroyed. Therefore, the vajra symbolizes the brilliant, indivisible and indestructible state of enlightenment, or Buddhahood. When we practice Vajrayana (also known as the Diamond Way), our goal is to reach enlightenment—the clear light state mind. We do this by destroying ignorance and cultivating our own diamond body, speech and mind.

The design of the vajra seems to have originated as a weapon. It is similar in form to a scepter or trident. In many ancient civilizations, the trident was symbolic of the thunderbolt. In India, this was the main weapon of the Vedic sky-god Indra, who controlled the forces of the sky. Buddhist legend has it that Shakyamuni took the weapon from Indra, who was using it wrathfully, harming enemies and creating destruction. Shakyamuni closed the prongs of the weapon, forming a non-violent, circular scepter. The Buddhist vajra hence absorbed the unbreakable and indivisible power of the thunderbolt.

The vajra is symmetrical, with two spheres, each with an eight-petalled lotus at its base, joined in the center with a solid sphere. In this way, the vajra is a symbol of duality, and the ability to move beyond it. One side represents the samsaric world of phenomena

and the other represents the nirvana world, which is beyond our usual consciousness. Other symbolic meanings of the two spheres (which are usually composed of five prongs) include the five negative emotions transforming into the five wisdoms, body and mind, conditional existence and absolute existence. The spheres themselves are open inside; they are sunyata or emptiness, which is the ultimate nature of being.

There is also the double vajra, which is composed of two vajras perpendicular to each other, creating four spheres. These spheres represent the four Buddhas of the four directions.



The vajra is always held in the right hand, for the right side is our male principle. The masculine energy is associated with method, compassionate action, an outward projection of energy. It is also held at the level of the navel. The navel is the seat of the tummo fire, which is our inner warmth, responsible for proper body functioning, emotion, love and, ultimately, spiritual development.

Indeed, there is great symbolism in the vajra.

The Bell or Ghanta

The bell, called ghanta in Sanskrit and dril bu in Tibetan, embodies the feminine principle. It is the vessel. Its open cavern is symbolic of emptiness, from which form—in the character of sound—emanates.

The bell is the most common musical instrument in Tantric Buddhist ritual. Sound serves many purposes. Its vibration resonates within us, carrying us to a meditative, focused state, while our bodies hum in vibration. The ringing of the bell also serves to protect the space where the ritual is being conducted. Its sound is auspicious and warns away any evil spirits that would interfere.

The bell is always held in the left hand, since the left side of our bodies is connected to our feminine energy. The feminine—and the bell—is associated with wisdom. The hollow part of the bell, which is empty, is an integral, defining aspect of the bell. This is symbolic of the fact that wisdom is inseparable from emptiness.

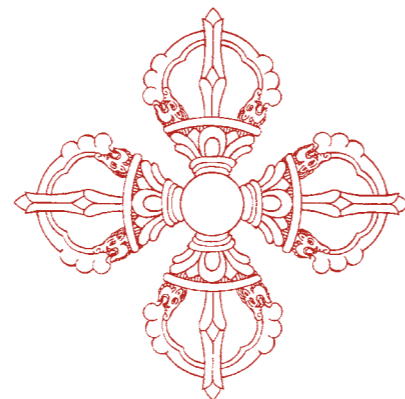
The bell is played at the level of the heart. Ringing it there has great significance. The goal of Tantra is to actualize the clear light state. It is through stopping the gross mind that we are able to manifest the great subtle mind and actualize the clear light state. Our great subtle mind is a part of us; it is always present, even though we are unaware of it. It is seated in the heart chakra, in the central channel. Ringing the bell at the heart helps to develop our awareness there and awaken our great subtle mind. This explanation is from the Highest Tantra.

The Union

The vajra and bell are paired together in ceremonies. Together, they remind us that in order to achieve enlightenment the two aspects must unite. We must move beyond duality and unite the vajra, as compassion, and the bell, as emptiness. Masculine and feminine become one. Body and mind become one. Wisdom and method unite.

We visualize the vajra as Buddha's body, the bell as Buddha's mind, and the sound of the bell as Buddha's speech.

The symbolism of the vajra and the symbolism of the bell mentioned here is just the surface of the deep meaning embodied in these powerful objects. Symbols are metaphors, and when we hold the vajra and bell, or simply have a picture of them, we can be reminded in an instant of the Buddhist Tantrayana path, of the goal of our practice, and of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas guiding, encouraging and protecting us. The objects point us toward our goal, reminding us of the nature of our being.



The Bell

