

From The Sun's Luminous Heart, Volume II: The History, View, & Practice of the Buddhist Siddhas

THE CHARNEL GROUND

Monk as Butcher

It was the Buddha himself who first sent practitioners into the charnel grounds (*shmashana*) to meditate. Spurred as he was into the spiritual life by the recognition that decay, disease, & death constituted the inevitable result of birth, human or otherwise, fleshly mortality became a central recollection of Buddhist doctrine, the pragmatic, often reiterated goad to vigor on the path. For all the emphasis placed in the Buddha's teachings on mind, the body was a kind of ground zero of practice. Seen as the karmic product of ignorance & locus of delusion, it was the unavoidable, existential prison, awaiting the inevitable execution of its death penalty. For sentient beings, the body is their unequivocal, egocentric territory. It anchors their clinging & maintains the continuity of their selfishness. The Buddha instructed his disciples in various ways to sever this core grasping and fixation.

One method was to meditate on the body's repulsiveness. Instead of playing up, as we tend to, its attractiveness, the practitioner focuses instead on its gross material realities: "There are in this body: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, gorge, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, solid fat, tears, liquid fat, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid, urine" (*Maha-Satipatthana-Sutta*). The monk is compared to "a skillful butcher...having slaughtered a cow and divided it into portions," encouraged to break it down into its component parts, including those of the elements, the bones being the earth element or the blood the water element, for example, in order to see its impermanent, egoless nature, composed of nothing at all worth clinging to.¹

But the best way to bring home this kind of investigation was to take it into the charnel ground, where the bodies lay decomposing, "being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, herons, dogs, leopards, tigers, jackals or by various kinds of worms," meditating that one's own body was no different & headed inescapably to the same end. The Buddha's nine charnel ground contemplations considered the corpses in varying states of decay, from still fresh, day old dead meat, two day old, or three day old flesh, "swollen, blue, and festering." The contemplations advance progressively with the decay, considering skeletons still connected by flesh & tendon, smeared in blood, but eventually "reduced to loose bones scattered in all directions—here bones of

the hand, there bones of the foot, shin bones, thigh bones, pelvis, spine, and skull,"² then those slowly bleaching in the sun, finally disintegrating into dust. The practitioner gazes into this mirror of the future, personalizing what we most would like to avoid, & instigating a potent nausea toward samsara.

This antidotal method did not always work as intended, however. In some monks it induced a nihilistic despair that led to suicide. In the case of Rajadatta, the merchant we discussed above who threw away all his investors' money on a beautiful whore, he found himself in the charnel ground looking for a suitable object of contemplation when he discovered the corpse of the very prostitute who'd ruined him, killed because she'd coveted & stolen another merchant's ring. A poem describing his meditation is recorded in the *Theragatha*:

*A recluse
went to the burning ground
found a woman's corpse
inside it a tangle of worms
Others blanched at the sight
but that poor dead creature's golden
breasts and
unshaved cunt
haunted me until I lost
control and shuddered with
violent urges*

It gives one pause that lust might actually be stronger than this starkest possible confrontation with the outcome of passion. Rajadatta rushes out of the charnel ground & collects himself:

*I considered
the object
considered the hungry ignorant acts
that brought it where it lay
considered the tangle of worms
and corpses
I stared into countless
rounds of suffering
stared into greed and hunger
stared into vanity*

*stared until desire
blinked like a lamp
and went out*

Fortunately, Rajadatta makes good on the efficacy of the Buddha's method particularly by seeing its larger implications. It's not just that we ourselves will die, but that the sum of our cupidity & scheming, the web of samsaric preoccupation, as exemplified by the whore's avaricious conniving, comes ineluctably to this horror.

Training Arena: Zombies, Vampire Women, & the Laughing Dead

So the charnel ground could induce not just revulsion toward clinging to physical mortality, but a renunciation of all the mental fabrications premised on the body. Going even further than the early tradition, the siddhas saw a profound meaning to the charnel ground as uncanny no man's land, the existential crux of birth, death, & space itself, & hence an intensely potent training ground for accomplishing yogic methods & mastering the nature of reality.

Located out beyond the edge of town, literally & figuratively, people in classical India brought the dead to charnel grounds for cremation or simply abandoned their bodies to predators & the elements. Grisly, unclean, & horrific, sometimes stacked with moldering corpses, charnel grounds had little link to daily society beyond funerary rites (if that). Prowled by jackals & other dangerous, contentious wildlife, haunted by agitated ghosts, demons, & vampires, they were in fact the last place any normal person would want to spend time, much less live. And for this very reason they provided sanctuary for criminals on the run (like our story of Khadgapa) & yogis looking for a place outside the bounds of social convention to face life on its rawest terms.

"A frightening, uncomfortable place," Padmasambhava tells his student Mandarava, "is the knife that severs discursive thought." On retreat alone, Mandarava had grown terrified by the night jungle sounds, which the great siddha compares to the terrifying sounds—"like a thousand roaring dragons"—heard in the bardo state between death & birth.³ His point to her is to use her terror in the immediate situation to acquire fearlessness & conquer the fundamental issues of birth, death, & transmigration. City life, with its familiar comforts, allows for a thoroughly human world with reassuring habits, schedule, entertainments, castes, & social mores—a framework of familiarity. But even the monastery, when compared to a charnel ground, could offer much the same set of comforting reference points, with a bed, regular meals, rituals, companionship, shared paradigm, & pecking order. Alone & unprotected by anything but their practice,

charnel ground yogis could not stand purely on scholarly erudition to negotiate a slavering jackal or desperately unhappy spirits shrieking in the middle of the night. With their emotions provoked piercingly, operatically, then the full intensity of their yogic discipline could be aroused as well & brought to bear with fierce one-pointedness. Hence the charnel ground became the medium for spiritual progress made quickly—much more quickly—than in the measured days passed in monastery compounds.

The charnel ground provided a limen into the spirit world, opening up a whole potential training ground for dealing with difficult sentient beings & treading into realms of hair-raising intensity. In the same way the charnel ground magnetized flesh-eating birds, wild cats, & ferocious dogs, so it attracted various kinds of low end spirits: cannibal-demons (*rakshasa*), tree divinities (*yaksha/yakshi*), locality demi-gods (*lokapala*), vampire women (*dakini*), zombies (*vetala/vetali*), varieties of demons, sub-demons, goblins, ghosts, & obstructive spirits of all sorts. Developing their meditative equipoise & a vision more subtle & penetrating than conventional perception of the material world, they necessarily had to contend with the realm of the uncanny, supernatural, & downright phantasmagoric. When a dakini leads Marpa into the charnel ground Blazing Fire Mountain to meet the guru Maitripa, “all the corpses, though moldy, putrid, and half burned, laughed, whistled, and made other sounds.”⁴

A primary thrust of charnel ground practice comes via its freakish, often supernatural assaults on meditative equipoise. In a more contemporary example, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche describes his father, Chimey Dorje, going to practice his sadhana one night in a charnel ground:

In eastern Tibet, in a place between two cliffs, there was a cemetery where corpses were abandoned. The place was renowned as being extremely frightening, and strange things would often happen to practitioners who stayed there. So my father went there one evening....After night had fallen, Chimey Dorje began his practice. All of a sudden, something fell down from the sky right before him. He looked at it and saw it was a human head, looking at him with glaring eyes and moving tongue. Another one fell down, then another one, making a loud thump when they hit the ground. One of them even hit him right on top of his head, and he felt a strong pain. After that the downpour became violent, like a hailstorm of human heads. They all seemed to be alive. Finally, the whole place was full of human heads, complaining and making noises. They coughed and spat up globs of putrid stuff. Some of them were moaning, “I died of rotting lungs.”

Still Chimey Dorje did not move. He continued his practice. The heads

shrank in size and diminished in number, until they eventually all vanished without a trace left.⁵

Chimey Dorje keeps his meditative composure as he faces a storm of severed heads like severed habitual egos, complaining of their lot, endlessly wagging their tongues, rotting from the inside, puking up their samsaric results, disembodied from reality.

One of the most challenging supernatural elements, the dakinis—so central to tantric practice—seem to be especially a discovery of the charnel ground yogis: a fanged, blood-sucking, carnivorous female who, despite all apparent unlikeliness, turned out to be an excellent dharma student & candidate for enlightenment—at least if she faced a yogi of sufficient backbone & accomplishment to tame & guide her. (Something Tilopa could do with aplomb.) A formidable, militant X-factor, “dakinis roam about, unaffiliated and untamed, creating chaos in many situations, fickle and terrifying. They embody worldly magic and power, haunting their victims in cemeteries and charnel grounds.”⁶ At least one commentary describes them as “‘heretical’ sorceresses...who have a nasty habit of killing people in order to consume the concretion that exists in their hearts in order to acquire magical powers.”⁷ It would be up to the wisdom & skillful means of the practitioner to subjugate such beings, binding them as protectors of the dharma, & leading them to realization. Of course, this was the work of masters, like Padmasambhava, famed with the epithet “gatherer of the dakinis”; the originator of the maha ati vajrayana lineage, Prahevajra, dwelled in Shitavana charnel ground teaching dharma to the dakinis there, & it is said that “many hundreds of thousands...attained rainbow body.”⁸ The dharma-bound dakini, in both sensual & fearsome forms, then also functioned as a protector & guide to the practitioner, & ultimately the great embodiment of enlightenment & the quintessential wisdom of the charnel ground. It’s likely that her very wildness, her powerful, outside the boundaries forcefulness aided her quick traversal of the path. (Much more on dakinis in Volumes III & IV.)

It was up to the yogin to tame such challenges, using whatever tools he or she had in their tantric kitbag. When the Tibetan Milarepa returns to his retreat cave & finds it full of local deities manifesting as demons, he meditates on his wisdom deity, uttering a subjugating mantra, but they won’t leave. He meditates on friendliness & compassion, but they won’t leave. He offers them songs of praise & realization, which encourage all but the strongest & most intransigent demon to leave. Then with compassion but without any self-cherishing, Mila climbs into the demon’s mouth, sacrificing himself, but the demon isn’t equal to such a meal & vanishes.⁹ In the end, Milarepa’s selflessness proved his ultimate protection.

Nevertheless, there’s no reason to think that the various methods found in the tantras

for combat, exorcism, protective circles, & many magical feats weren't trained in & perfected, particularly in the charnel ground, where such means could not be dallied with as mere parlor games but had to be pursued with urgency. Developing the minor siddhis or magic powers trained the yogin in one-pointedness, the use of the mind & its subtle energies, & steady performance under heart-banging stress. The siddhas had oral instructions & sadhanas dedicated to binding & commanding other beings to carry out tasks. Krishnacharya, often cited as one of Tilopa's masters, was noted for a zombie he'd generated in a dead body & used as a mount to get around. This became part of his iconography—depicted seated on the back of a laboriously trudging corpse.

Svoboda's books on the 20th century charnel ground yogi of the Hindu tantric Aghora sect, Vimalananda, describe just this sort of practice with a much less mythical veneer, as well as its concomitant dangers:

An old fellow died right in front of me. He was trying to show off and challenged me to a contest. We procured two corpses. The idea was to see who could bring life into one most quickly and control it most firmly. I warned him that he was too old to be trying such stunts but he was beyond reasoning with. As soon as the corpse started to sit up and he tried to control it, the spirit which had been forced to sit in the corpse caught hold of him. His nerves failed, his heart failed, and he died.¹⁰

This kind of yogic brinksmanship has its consequences.

I asked Ponlop Rinpoche about the purpose of so many kinds of relative siddhis taught in the tantras when it's also often repeated that such magical powers could easily turn into a sidetrack from the real purpose of attaining enlightenment. He replied: "They use the power to train the mind....For example, someone's trying to kill you. Like you make someone angry...a really strong guy, like a butcher ... he has these knives and stuff, and if you make [him] angry, [he comes] after you, and you use the power and see [what happens]....That's a really dangerous game. But they use that to work with your mind of fear, transcend it."

I asked him if, in this example, the kind of tantric interest was in the intensity or extremity of it, aiming to keep a stable mind under duress while executing their power, & he agreed: "I think the mahasiddhas were addicted to this intensity."¹¹

Killing Ground as Dance Floor

The stakes for the siddhas weren't just training the mind through the acquisition of power, facing down irascible spirits & living with the potential for harm or death like a samurai for hire, but their interest was to conquer the three worlds, like the Buddha facing Mara's army under the Bodhi Tree or Vajrapani placing his foot triumphantly on Maheshvara's chest. The charnel ground milieu made the metaphor of the samsaric wheel into bluntest possible, right-before-your-eyes truth, while in turn renewing the depth of symbolism the siddhas came to see in the body parts scattered around the landscape.

Where would we recognize the charnel ground experience in modern terms? How do we see this as other than a grotesque exploration of some peculiar & antiquated religious approach? Trungpa Rinpoche cites hospitals as something resembling charnel grounds, "the place where you are born and die."¹² Simmer-Brown describes some other situations:

In contemporary Western society, the charnel ground might be a prison, a homeless shelter, the welfare roll, or a factory assembly line. The key to its successful support of practice is its desperate, hopeless, or terrifying quality. For that matter, there are environments that appear prosperous and privileged to others but are charnel grounds for their inhabitants—Hollywood, Madison Avenue, Wall Street, Washington, D.C. These are the worlds in which extreme competitiveness, speed, and power rule, and the actors in their dramas experience intense emotion, ambition, and fear. The intensity of their dynamics makes all of these situations ripe for the Vajrayana practice of the charnel ground.¹³

The very vibrancy & uncontrolled energy of phenomena, creating & destroying, raising one up as victor while simultaneously stripping away one's position, credentials, & reference points, feeding & starving you until you can't figure out if you're winning or losing—or who's winning & losing--turns out to be a vital working basis.

Trungpa Rinpoche:

The charnel ground is where the realities of pain, death, sickness, fighting, aggression, and passion are demonstrated....Everybody fights for one piece of meat—flesh. It's not cooked, it's raw meat; it's not on a plate, it's lying on the ground horrifically. Expressions of death, bodies of death. The carnivorous animals are very turned-on, passionate. They want to scoop eyes, crunch on ears, suck and swallow the internal organs like good spaghetti. They're in love, passionate! They like the juiciness and the variety existing in the charnel ground.

That's exactly what we do, actually. We don't have to grow wings or beaks or claws, but that's what we are. In this gigantic charnel ground called the world, whenever a piece of meat is available to us we become jackals, vultures, ravens, dogs. It's an expression of poverty and it is an expression of aggression. Hunger and aggression: without any reason, we get pissed off; without any reason, we feel passionate.¹⁴

Passion & aggression, normally veiled by social etiquette, ordered & excused by social hierarchy, sublimated by familial relationships, shaped into political ideology, & so on become revealed in the charnel ground as the true naked lunch. The dead feed the ravenous hunger of the living who in turn become the dead, a cycle electrified by passion, blindly pursued with aggression. Rather than some pure negation of life, the death & decay present a vivid, energized, interdependent world. Trungpa Rinpoche:

[In the charnel ground] the expressions of birth and death take place simultaneously: skeletons dance and wild animals tear bodies; when somebody else chases them, they drop the bodies, so there are loose legs and loose arms and loose heads; while one wild animal chews on one part of a body, a more powerful animal comes and eats its tail. It's simultaneous birth and death. Trying to run away from life creates its own death at the same time. It's very gloomy and very terrifying, not particularly pleasant—provided you look at it from someone else's point of view. But from its own point of view it is self-existing; it becomes extraordinarily rich and fertile.¹⁵

So the siddhas' retreat to the charnel ground, despite appearances, exemplified an attempt to come into the embrace of life & deal with it on its most authentic terms, & this was recognized, particularly in anuttara yoga, as the primordial foundation of the mandala. *Mandala* means "group," "association," "society," but in this context connotes "totality." However, the tantric view of totality demanded a genuinely complete approach that saw duality or the relative, phenomenal world as fully included in every way. Conventional religious views sought to raise their practitioners above the fray, lift them up into a heavenly sphere untouched by the grime of time & flesh. Mahayana Buddhism committed the bodhisattva to samsara & other beings, placing him or her in samsaric situations where they would maintain their pure discipline while acting out apparently samsaric roles. The vajrayana took this to its full & logical conclusion, not trying to evade duality at any level but working with it as an expression of the whole. Trungpa Rinpoche remarks:

Usually we think of nonduality as not split, not schizophrenic. We think of it as a kind of meditative state with no dualistic distinctions, so everything must be

okay. But things don't work like that. There actually seems to be nondual samsara, which is an interesting point. The logic is that if you have some duality or split personality, you have to have some background to begin with which is one thing. Out of that comes the many.¹⁶

Elsewhere he states:

We could say that the real world is that in which we experience pleasure and pain, good and bad. There is some act of intelligence which provides the criteria of things as they are, a basic dualistic notion. But if we are completely in touch with these dualistic feelings, that absolute experience of duality is itself the experience of non-duality. Then there is no problem at all, because duality is seen from a perfectly open and clear point of view in which there is no conflict; there is a tremendous encompassing vision of oneness. Conflict arises because duality is not seen as it is at all. It is seen only in a biased way, a very clumsy way.¹⁷

Whereas the normal approach of being "biased" (meaning egocentric) & "clumsy" (meaning the projections of the ego onto phenomena) would naturally lead to the gross & subtle viciousness of samsara, the yogi sought to relate with the energies of duality nakedly, without filter. If birth & death arise simultaneously, just as each moment is dying, dissolving as it's born & manifesting, if form is emptiness & emptiness form, & samsara arises simultaneously with nirvana, then the dualistic world of charnel bluntness arises inseparably with nirvanic pure land. The wheel of samsara becomes the total purity of the wisdom mandala, if one has eyes to see it. In the charnel ground, with nothing to cling to, nothing to gain, with the end of all worldly ambition explicitly acknowledged, one could forcefully transform delusion into wisdom; the unadulterated energy of what normally fueled klesha mind—fear, desire, anger, dullness, competition—got stripped down to its wakeful, empty essence. Duality didn't have to be dissolved into some formless, blank state, like that of the highest god realms. Instead its living, dynamic energy became an expression of the background or open space from which it arose: "This idea of the basic mandala, total mandala, is from nobody's point of view; it is its own point of view. Therefore, it is free from birth and death as well as being the epitome of birth and death at the same time. It is that which sustains the whole universe, the whole of existence, as well as killing everything."¹⁸

For the practitioner, according to Simmer-Brown, "The charnel ground becomes a place of openness in which one can relax the struggle of cyclic existence and celebrate the freedom of clarity. The corpses rotting there are the concepts and schemes that have perished, especially the notions of self whose veins have been cut."¹⁹ Therefore, having

seen through & renounced samsaric clinging at the grisly crux of birth & death, time & timelessness, the conditioned & unconditioned, the yogi or yogini arise in the midst of the utter, brutal defeat of life wearing the expressions of death as symbols of transforming samsara into nirvana, expressing the essential unity of their apparent dualism. The bare skull, instead of the grinning death's head that mocks the continual result of clinging to birth, became the insignia of egolessness. Bone yard detritus became the yogi & yogini's raiment as conquerors of the wheel of time.

One of the more vivid histories of the Atiyoga lineage, *Seven Segments to Establish the Great History (Bhadu Patri Sakari Nama)* by the Indian Vimalamitra, records not just the lives of the siddhas but pays special attention to the charnel grounds where they dwelled & practiced, thus giving almost as much weight to the *place* of enlightened tantric conduct as to the deeds of the masters. Vimalamitra, a contemporary of Padmasambhava, placeable in the late 8th to early 9th century, transmitted this account to two translators in Tibet.²⁰ Since the charnel grounds he recounts would not normally appear to conventional perception, we see that even by this time they've ascended to trans-worldly status. Luminous & hyper-vivid, abodes for often grotesque supernatural beings, the charnel grounds depicted here seem both idealized & terrifying, the sacred expression of the surreal.

In one example, Manjushrimitra lived in the famous Sosadvipa charnel ground:

Its circumference was one league and in its center was a self-appeared stupa, broad and lofty. It had wheels and a coral parasol and was made from precious silver. Beautifully decorated with bells and networks of jingles, it was ornamented with the sun and moon. On its side were self-appeared images of the eight [gauris or mother goddesses].

A magnificent, self-arisen Buddhist monument marks the center of the charnel ground as mandala. Since it's "self-arisen," it's not subject to ordinary birth & death or causes & conditions, & hence, a little ironically, neither is this cemetery. It continues, "To the northeast of this stupa was the lake known as Razor of Darkness in which water monsters and various other types of malignant beasts lived, and it was surrounded by a rocky shore." Features of the landscape emphasize roughness, rawness, & the vital, teeming realm of dangerous, hidden animals.

There were also peculiar mundane gods and demonic spirits living to its southwest. In the top of a huge black *nyagrodha* tree, the god of trees, was the nest of a winged scavenger. Half way up was the nest of a jet black viper, and at the base a den of black flesh-eating boars. Among the mundane gods were

Ananda Kumara whose face was that of a lion; and who was holding a sword, a human head, a wooden spear and a trident with a human head in his four hands. His body was decorated with garlands made from skulls and draped in a cloak of black silk. With a retinue of one hundred thousand slayer mamos, he was riding an ox, while gorging on flesh and blood.

The tree & animals come across as dark & menacing, but the worldly god seems fully dedicated to a modality of violence. Then the depiction grows ever more twisted & astonishing while listing the dakini inhabitants:

There were also countless gatherings of dakinis. Some of them were riding lions with their hair hanging loose, raising up victory banners of nine stacked skulls. Some were riding on flocks of birds, holding banners of lion skin. Some had one body but eleven heads and were eating from entrails, hearts and various other things. Some were black women brandishing their braided hair while emitting jackals from their mouths. Some had human bodies but with wings and within the immensity of space they were hurling down rainstorms with bolts of lightning, while raising banners of tiger skin in their hands. Some of them were tearing the upper part of their bodies from the lower, and tearing out their lungs and heart. Some were cutting off their own limbs and tossing them in all directions. Thus there were an untold number of dakinis displaying various types of miraculous feats.

This vision of the dakini world goes well beyond the normal fear men have of women into a magical & horrific deconstruction of existence itself, much less of civilized norms. (Is this any way for goddesses to act?) But it points us into the wild heart of the charnel ground reality of unleashed energy, imagery, & miracle taking place free of the imposition of "civilized" concept or boundaries.

There were also winged scavengers, scavenging boars, venomous snakes, jackals in various colors, wolves and *kilikas*, and many other creatures. There were ghastly hornets, and innumerable heaps of fresh and old corpses, bones, pools of blood, huts made of human heads, and piled up houses of dried skulls. Some were scraping, some were eating, some vomiting, some whimpering, some were poking out eyes, some sucking marrow and gnawing on bone, some were devouring entrails, and so on.

The whole landscape hums vibrantly with raw consumption & livid, exposed innards. As Trungpa Rinpoche remarks above, "From its own point of view...it becomes extraordinarily rich and fertile." We're not in a place that kowtows in any way to our

delicate sensibilities & terror of death. Instead, we're in the *playground of death*, where the predators & dakinis cavort—and this is precisely where the mahasiddha who has mastered birth & death finds his seat:

In the middle of all this dwelled the lords of yogis, the many male and female practitioners engaging in the various types of courageous yogic conduct. And here resided the great master Manjushrimitra, seated in the crossed-legged vajra posture upon a lion throne, with various raised banners and open parasols made from gold, silver, peacock feather etc. He remained within a hut built from stacked skulls and bones, surrounded by a gathering of dakinis, sustaining his samadhi in the state of composure for one hundred and nine years.²¹

Though he dwells in a hut made of skulls, he still has the refined objects of banners & parasols as the signs of rank from the broader, conventional Buddhist tradition. He occupies this horrific scene radiating meditative serenity & awakened power right at the center of it, inspiring the practice & wisdom play of the yogis, yoginis, & dakinis. The whole display itself is his wisdom play at some level, & what's described isn't an historical site in a standard biography (though the historical Manjushrimitra may well have lived in Sosadvipa). It's become the wrathful mandala of the higher tantras. Unfortunately, Vimalamitra seems not to have left a commentary describing the meaning of all these images, for they're certainly symbolic at some level, & simultaneously visionary. Here we can sense the compelling dynamic of these kinds of images, & how they came to be used as part of the formal practice & iconography of tantra.

According to Beer in his survey of Tibetan Buddhist iconography, the Indian Buddhist siddhas adapted the following accouterments from the Shaivite Kapalikas: "bone ornaments, an animal skin loin cloth, marks of human ash, a skull-cup, *damaru* [hand drum], flaying knife, thighbone trumpet, and the skull-topped tantric staff or *khatvanga*." Of these, he identifies the staff, damaru, & skull-cup as the primary attributes of the Kapalikas, which became within vajrayana representations of the meditation deity's body, speech, & mind.²²

The khatvanga—originally in Kapalika hands a pole with a skull on top—came to have a particularly intricate iconography & layered symbolism. An eight-sided shaft, with a half vajra finial at its lower end, & a top consisting of a banderole & hanging damaru & bell, surmounted by a crossed-vajra, then by a vase, followed by a freshly severed head, five day old head, & skull, atop which was a vajra or trident. The khatvanga's essential symbolism, in the crooked arm of a deity, was that of its consort, therefore indicating the union of bliss (masculine) & emptiness (feminine) & through this union the body

principle of compassionate action. Held by Vajrayogini, it represented her consort Chakrasamvara, with its various aspects symbolizing his mandala palace & 62 retinue deities. More generically, outwardly the khatvanga stood for the material universe in the form of Mount Meru; inwardly it symbolized the eightfold path & the three yanas; secretly, it represented the channels & subtle body practice.²³ The khatvanga's most striking & charnel feature—three severed heads—often symbolize the three kayas or manifestations of enlightened realization. The skull stands for the dharmakaya, the five day old head is the sambhogakaya, & the freshly-severed head the nirmanakaya. They can also represent the transmutation of passion, aggression, & ignorance

Immediately we're let in on the rather bewildering complexity of vajrayana symbolism that draws on all three yanas & weds them to charnel ground emblems to express its deep meanings. The particularities of the symbolism might well alter from practice to practice, depending on the form of deity & mandala the yogi employed, though all anutarra yoga sadhanas were understood to practice the unity of samsara & nirvana.

The damaru symbolizes the deity's speech; it could be wooden, but in charnel fashion, was also made by joining two skulls forming a double-headed drum held in the right hand. True to charnel ground necromancy, the "kapalika damaru" should be made from two skulls of a teenage brahmin boy & girl, endowing it with a special level of magical power, perhaps here a certain wrathful (sacred bone), sexual (male & female youth) potency. The male principle of skillful means is joined to the female quality of prajna, & thus the rapid sounding of the drum invokes "the sound of great bliss," inspiring & summoning the buddhas, bodhisattvas, & dakinis. Hence the speech principle generates joy & blessings.²⁴

The skull cup (*kapala*) replaces the monk's begging bowl for the siddhas. In Section I, we discussed its Kapalika origins as the head of the god Brahma. Here, exoterically it's the reminder of impermanence—nourishment comes from a container of death just as all life is contained within transience. It is also used to make offerings & as the vessel of sanctification. In the hand of a wrathful deity it particularly refers to transmutation, turning the raw substances of samsara into the nourishment or intoxicant of wisdom. For wrathful practice, there are again necromantic specifications for the ideally potent skull: a skull of a brahmin or someone murdered or executed, someone who died in puberty, or an eight year old produced through incest. Beer lists the substances found in the skull cup as "divine nectar (Skt. *amrita*), vital nectar (semen), alcohol, ritual cakes or *tormas*, fresh blood, marrow, intestines, fat, and the brains, heart, and lungs of demonic enemies, who are personified as *maras* and *rudras*."²⁵ The deity consumes blood & entrails symbolizing taking the life force of samsaric energies & feeding it into the deity's power & radiance of wisdom. This is the mind or secret essence level of

vajrayana: the transmutation of ego's energy into realization.

As we'll discuss below, deities are invited externally or identified with internally, so that the practitioner views his or her body, speech, & mind as no different from the deity. We should then understand that these implements can be used for calling & offering to the deity, or more importantly, reflect the yogi's identity *as* the deity. Thus, in tiger skin loin cloth, carrying a tantric staff & skull cup, sounding the hand drum, the yogi begging at your door may see himself as blue, fanged, skull crowned, & looking at you with three blood shot eyes.

The mandala, the visualized palace where the deity resides in tantric sadhanas, is constructed on top of the no man's land of the charnel ground, & the deity arises within that palace adorned in charnel ground ornaments. The Chakrasamvara mandala, for example, is surrounded in what are called the "eight great charnel grounds," referencing major Indian cemeteries of the tantric period, & Chakrasamvara wears a skull crown, a garland of severed heads, various bone ornaments, a tiger skin, etc. The anuttara yoga deities are inevitably either both sensuous & wrathful (called "semi-wrathful") or very, *very* wrathful, with a wholly demonic kind of appearance. Wrath, as we explored in Section I & in this discussion, is particularly associated with the use of power for subjugation & transformation. Chakrasamvara subjugates Bhairava & transforms his worldly body & ornaments into enlightened expressions. Thus these elements become essential to anuttara yoga iconography & enter a kind of symbolic framework that is no longer a purely literal, exoteric experience of death imagery, but describes an enlightened world of power that no external demon can defeat, nor internal neurosis can manipulate.

The Shitavana charnel ground near Bodhgaya where the Buddha attained enlightenment, & where, as we've noted, Prahevajra, the great ati yogi lived for 75 years, & some very important tantric transmissions took place, was one the most famous Indian cemeteries. In the following sadhana text, it's the site for one of Mahakala's retinue, Ksetrapala. Here we can see how the charnel ground imagery gets formalized into a world the practitioner visualizes & actively identifies with, where the various forms of death & wrath become concentrated into a powerful expression:

To the south of Bodhgaya is situated the great cemetery [*Sitavana*]. At this supreme place, one can hear the mighty voices of the [*yamas*], the magically-powerful howling of the [*matrika*, the "mother goddesses"], the splashing of the sea of blood, the sputtering of the lamps fed with human fat, there is visible the coiling smoke rising from the evil burnt offering, there sounds the thudding of the male [demons], who turn in a ring-dance, the blaring of the thigh bone

trumpets, the roar of wild animals; there is visible the quick flaring up of the great scorching lightnings, is audible the fierce rolling of thunder and the crashing of great yellow meteors; the horrible laughter of the multitude of [demons] and *yaksas* causes the earth-foundations to quake. At such a supreme place resides he, who has one face and two hands and possesses a terrifying body. His mouth is open and he clicks his tongue. His three eyes blaze like the fire at the end of the *kalpa*. He is of a violently desirous nature, his body radiates and his limbs are strong. He roars like a dragon the horrible syllable *hum*. The colour of his body is a brilliant sky-blue, like the hue of the world mountain *Sumeru*. In his right hand he holds the [flaying knife]—with which he cuts out the hearts of enemies—and he drinks blood from a skull-cup, which he holds with his left hand. The trampling of his feet causes the three realms to quake and in the countless worlds he reduces all kinds of evil powers to dust.—Ksetrapala and you, the excellent [consort], mistress of all the [*matrika/mothers*], you, *yaksas*—cutting the lifethread of enemies—, guardians of the ten world-quarters, war-hordes of the ocean-like multitudes of those, who were bound by an oath: come here, all of you, and partake of the offerings!²⁶

Needless to say, this is *not* a literal description of Shitavana charnel ground (at least not to anyone's conventional perception), but it's here we find its various attributes & denizens surrounding the wrathful protector of the dharma, while he copulates with his consort & tramples every kind of manifestation of ego beneath his dancing feet.

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14. Trungpa, Chogyam. *Mandala*. Boulder: Vajradhatu, 1978, 159.
15. Ibid., 55.
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23. Ibid., 102-106.
24. Ibid., 107-108.
25. Ibid., 110-112.
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