

COSMOS, EMPOWERMENT, AND RITUAL REGALIA

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Fig. 1 Vajracharya Priest's Crown; Nepal; ca. 13th century; copper, gold, crystal, turquoise; 14 × 8½ × 9½ in. (35.6 × 21.6 × 22.9 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Bashford Dean, 1906; 06.191; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

VAJRACHARYA PRIEST'S CROWN

Nepal
ca. 13th century

SUMMARY

Art historian Aurora Graldi introduces the history, symbolism, and manufacture of a thirteenth-century gold crown worn by tantric priests in Nepal. Used during initiations and public ceremonies, the crown has a complex iconography that identifies the priest with Buddha Vairochana. This crown exemplifies the fine hammered metalwork technique known as repoussé, for which Nepalese artisans are renowned to this day.

Nepalese Buddhism revolves around rituals, and Vajracharya crowns are a visual manifestation of this elaborate system of rituals. Crowns such as this one, the main ritual regalia worn by Vajracharya priests at crucial moments of Vajrayana ceremonies, serve as potent symbols of the magical power of specialized priests and underscore their high status in the Newar social structure.

This crown has a singular iconographic configuration that makes it unique to the Nepalese Buddhist artistic tradition. In Nepalese Buddhism, Vajrayana refers to the esoteric tantric path followed by the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley to attain enlightenment. The Vajrayana path entails the worship of tantric deities and the fulfillment of an awakened state through the performance of esoteric rituals.

VAJRACHARYA CROWNS AS THREE-DIMENSIONAL MANDALAS

The priest's crown has an oblong shape composed of three semispheres of decreasing size. Openwork medallions with different motifs and figures are evenly distributed on the crown. It is topped by a vajra, the prominent five-prong instrument with a stylized lotus flower and a central pearl at the base. On the lowest level of the helmet, four medallions depicting four of the Five Cosmic Buddhas are positioned in correspondence with the cardinal directions. Each crowned buddha, framed by a halo, sits cross-legged on a lotus pedestal atop a mythical golden-winged bird with a ferocious expression (*garuda*). The four Cosmic Buddhas seen here, Akshobya,

Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and Ratnasambhava, make hand gestures specific to each Buddha. The fifth Cosmic Buddha, Vairochana, is symbolized by the half vajra at the top. The upper level of the helmet displays openwork medallions decorated with lotus flowers and foliate motifs and a celestial goddess holding a windblown sash.

The components of this crown present the core iconographic elements of a mandala. Within the Vajrayana tradition, a mandala is a cosmic diagram of symbols representing the entire universe. Mandalas can be rendered in many visual forms: mural paintings, paintings on cloth, three-dimensional compositions, or temporary sand creations. The mandala of the Five Cosmic Buddhas (fig. 2) is among the most common. The Vajracharya crown is a three-dimensional construction of this theme. The helmet embodies Mount Meru, which is the fulcrum of the universe. The four Cosmic Buddhas preside over pure realms in the south, north, west, and east and guide the Vajrayana practitioners in the path toward enlightenment. Vairochana (fig. 3) is the ultimate deity of the Vajrayana system: he is placed at the center of the cosmic field, and in the figurative form holds a vajra with two five-prong finials in his right hand; in this crown he is denoted by the vajra itself. This pentad of Cosmic Buddhas is represented in a superb forehead ornament made of settings of precious stones: the four directional Buddhas flank the double-pronged vajra at the center, which is made of a setting of crystal and turquoise (fig. 4).



Fig. 2 Vajradhatu (Diamond Realm) Mandala; central Tibet; 14th century; distemper and gold on cloth; 36 × 29½ in. (91.4 × 74.9 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Lent by The Kronos Collections; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, image source Art Resource, NY



Fig. 3 Sarvavid Vairochana Mandala; Tibet; 17th century; pigments on cloth; 33½ × 26¼ in. (85.1 × 66.7 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.346 (HAR 773)



Fig. 4 The Five Tathagata, or Cosmic Buddhas, Forehead Ornament for a Deity; Newari, for the Nepal or Tibet market; 17th–19th century; gold, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, garnet, lapis lazuli, coral, turquoise; 2¾ × 8½ in. (7 × 21.6 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1915; 15.95.161; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

CROWNS: RITUAL REGALIA OF VAJRACHARYA PRIESTS

In Sanskrit, the term “Vajrayana” means the “way of the vajra” or the “Diamond way,” and “Vajracharya” means “Masters of the Diamond Way.” The vajra is, indeed, the archetypal symbol of tantric Buddhism in Nepal and alludes to the adamantine state of existence of human beings who reach full enlightenment. It is represented in the three most important ritual regalia of Vajracharya priests: the vajra ritual scepter, the vajra bell, and the crown. Initially, the crown is gifted to young boys who descend from Vajracharya families during the initiation ceremony.¹ This initiation ceremony consists of a complex series of rituals that consecrate boys as Vajra priests and invest them with the esoteric power to perform Vajrayana rituals. At the climax of this ceremony, the initiated boy wears the consecrated crown, while holding in his hands the consecrated vajra scepter and bell. Through this consecration, the crown acquires ritual agency: it empowers Vajracharya’s high status. The act of wearing this crown evokes the priest’s religious achievement: the head of the priest aligns with the central axis—corresponding to the half vajra at the top of the crown—and identifies with Buddha Vairochana himself. A direct visual parallel with Vairochana gives the priest authority to guide other practitioners on the path to enlightenment.

The crown, the property of Vajracharya families, is often transmitted from generation to generation. After the performance of the initiation ceremony, it becomes an essential accoutrement in the rituals of the consecration and empowering of sacred images and monuments. Vajracharya priests officiate at these usually communal rituals for the salvation of all Buddhist devotees in public spaces, in the presence of donors who commissioned the ceremony.

Newar Buddhism constitutes an elaborate pluralistic religious system, which combines ancient forms of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism of Indian origin. The Newar

Buddhist community is organized in castes, whose classification relates to ritual, social, and economic allocations.² Within this socioreligious caste structure, Vajracharya occupy the highest position and are recognized by the entire Buddhist community as the officiating priests. Vajracharya have the duty to perform rituals and to guide the spiritual life of the community. They are married, householder monks; the observance of marriage rules and caste endogamy, as well the initiation ceremony of young Vajracharya boys, are pivotal to this system. Traditionally, Vajracharya and their families reside in compounds known as *baha* (*vihara*, in Sanskrit), likely former monasteries built around the main shrine and the courtyard where Vajracharya perform rituals. The architectural structure of the Nepalese monastery develops from ancient models in northeastern India, such as those found at Nalanda.

AN ANCIENT RITUAL REGALIA, A CONTINUING TRADITION

The usage of this type of crown in tantric ceremonies goes back to at least the twelfth century, when Nepal had close interactions with the religious and artistic traditions of the Buddhist Pala Kingdom (eighth to twelfth century).³ Crowns from this period are rare; the earliest surviving crown dates to 1145 (fig. 5), and a few other crowns dating from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century are now conserved in museum collections. The crown presented here is among the earliest surviving examples; the high quality of the craftsmanship, the elongated shape, the simple representation of figures and motifs allow one to ascribe this crown to the thirteenth century.



Fig. 5 Vajracharya Priest's Crown; Nepal; dated 1145; copper, gold, lapis lazuli; 10 5/8 × 8 1/2 in. (27.2 × 21.5 cm); Musée national des arts asiatiques–Guimet, Paris; MA 4929 (HAR 85957); photograph © RMN-Grand Palas / Art Resource, NY

Nepalese scroll paintings (*paubhas*) give extensive insight into the usage of Vajracharya crowns and the associated ritual practices in ancient times. The lower register of these scroll paintings often portrays ritual scenes in which the officiating priest wears a crown of similar shape. In the Mandala of the Sun God Surya Surrounded by Eight Planetary Deities (fig. 6), a detail showcases a priest performing the fire ritual (fig. 7) in front of his acolytes wearing elegant ritual garments and a multitiered crown of golden color.



Fig. 6 Mandala of the Sun God Surya Surrounded by Eight Planetary Deities; Nepal; dated, likely 1379; distemper on cloth; 32 5/8 × 21½ in. (82.9 × 54.6 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Zimmerman Family Collection; Purchase, The Vincent Astor Foundation and Friends of Asian Art Gifts, 2012; 2012.462; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)



Fig. 7 Detail of Mandala of the Sun God Surya Surrounded by Eight Planetary Deities showing a Vajracharya priest performing the fire ritual in the presence of the donor's family; Nepal; dated, likely 1379; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Zimmerman Family Collection; Purchase, The Vincent Astor Foundation and Friends of Asian Art Gifts, 2012; 2012.462; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, image source Art Resource, NY

This is a living tradition in the Kathmandu Valley, which persisted throughout the centuries and the complex social and doctrinal changes in Newar Buddhism.

Vajracharya crowns are still produced by local artisans ; the iconographic composition remains identical, while the shape and stylistic lexicon reflect modern manufacture and taste. While performing lavish tantric ceremonies, Vajracharya priests today sit cross-legged in monastic courtyards surrounded by votive lamps (fig. 8). Dressed in colorful silk garments with gold embroidery and wearing a crown, they hold a bell and a vajra scepter in their hands as they recite mantras in front of the Buddhist community (fig. 9).⁴



Fig. 8 A Vajracharya priest wearing a crown with the Five Cosmic Buddhas performs a tantric ceremony, a vajra bell visible on the floor, in the monastery of Kwa Baha, Nepal, in 2011; photograph © Kerry Lucinda Brown



Fig. 9 Todd Lewis, "25 Vajracharya Crowns in Ritual Use 2," *YouTube*, September 2, 2019, 3:32, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=NKWiGUd13yk>

VAJRACHARYA CROWNS: MASTERPIECES OF REPOUSSÉ TECHNIQUE BY NEWAR ARTISANS

Vajracharya crowns exemplify the skills of Newar artisans working in the repoussé technique, which has thrived in the Kathmandu Valley since at least the seventh century. The central component of the crown is made from sheets of embossed copper. Medallions and other decorative elements are attached to it with rivets and split pins, expertly hidden in the elaborate design. The surface is then fire gilt with an amalgam of mercury and gold. Newar artisans are rightly considered among the most accomplished metalworkers in Asia, and the traditional repoussé technique, mastered in the workshops of the Kathmandu Valley, is still practiced today. Crystals and turquoise are inset into the front band of the crown, and other semiprecious stones are visible on the halos surrounding the four Cosmic Buddhas. The only cast element of the crown is the half vajra at the top.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The initiation ceremony (*acharyabhishekha*) consecrates young boys as Vajra masters. The many steps of this ceremony are thoroughly described by David N. Gellner, “The Consecration of a Vajra Master in Newar Buddhism,” in *Les habitants du toit du monde: Etudes recueillies en hommage à Alexander W. MacDonald*, ed. Samten Gyaltzen Karmay and Philippe Sagant (Nanterre: Publications de la Société d’ethnologie, 1997), 659–75.

² The multifaceted aspects of the Newar Buddhist caste system have been thoroughly investigated by David N. Gellner, *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and Its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

³ Because of the paucity of early visual evidence, it is hard to determine the origin of these crowns and how they were deployed. John Guy, “Crowns of the Vajra Masters: Tracing Nepalese Buddhist Ritual Art,” *Orientalism* 49, no. 2 (March/April) (2018): 90–101 suggests that crowned deities of Indic Buddhist traditions provided the model for ritual crowns. Alexander von Rospatt, “Vajracharya Crowns and Diadems: Structure, Iconography, and Function,” in *Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment*, ed. John Henry Rice and Jeffrey S. Durham, Exhibition catalog (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2019), 171–79 points out the difficulties in assessing the origin and the earlier development of the Vajracharya type of crown, as it is unique to Newar Buddhism of the Kathmandu Valley.

⁴ Two recent exhibitions, *Crowns of the Vajra Masters: Ritual Art of Nepal* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [2017–18] and *Dharma and Punya: Buddhist Ritual Art of Nepal* at the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts (2019), showcase the central role of ritual implements in the Nepalese context.

FURTHER READING

Guy, John. 2018. "Crowns of the Vajra Masters: Tracing Nepalese Buddhist Ritual Art." *Oriental Art* 49, no. 2 (March/April): 90–101.

Huntington, John C., and Dina Bangdel. 2003. *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, 560. Chicago: Serindia.

Kim, Jinah, and Todd Lewis. 2019. *Dharma and Punya: Buddhist Meditational Art*, 256. Leiden: Hotei.

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ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

This essay is featured in *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, a publication from the Rubin Museum of Art that illuminates Himalayan art through a collection of significant objects from the Neolithic era to today.

Along with a [digital platform](#) and traveling exhibition, this publication is part of the [Rubin's Project Himalayan Art](#), an integrated initiative that presents a sweeping introduction to Himalayan art. Located in New York City, the Rubin Museum of Art explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas, and serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation. Learn more at:

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