

Indology Colloquium Lecture Series

Summer Semester 2025

Guest speaker:

Hillary Langberg (Bard College, New York)

11 July 2025 | 10:00-12:00 Uhr

Seminar Room 002 || Keplerstr. 2



**Embodiments of Aid: The Role of Bodhisattva Emanation Doctrine in the
Centering of Female Deities in Mahayana Indian Buddhism (c. 3rd-6th centuries CE)**

Since the Indian monk Atiśa brought the renowned goddess Tārā to Tibet from India in the eleventh century, she has been a globally-recognized female bodhisattva of great compassion. Her rise to prominence in Indian Buddhism has nonetheless remained obscure, as has that of other female deities depicted flanking buddhas and great bodhisattvas (aspiring buddhas) in the rock-cut monastic cave temples of the western Deccan (c. sixth century CE). This talk will investigate how female deities became revered figures in Mahāyāna Indian Buddhism, despite the early first-millennium prohibition of advanced female bodhisattvas. It draws evidence from the *Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa* and *Mahāvairocana Tantra*, the two earliest Mahāyāna and tantric ritual manuals to mention Tārā, placing it in conversation with roughly-contemporaneous visual material, primarily deities represented in relief sculptures the Kānherī monastic cave complex (Mumbai). My findings demonstrate that bodhisattva emanation doctrine played a major role in the conceptual centering of goddesses in Mahāyāna contexts.



Hillary Langberg (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion and Art History and Visual Culture at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Her research focuses on the historical development of goddess traditions in Indian Mahayana Buddhism by examining both visual and textual sources. She is currently completing a monograph, *Goddesses of the Great Vehicle: The Centering of Female Deities in Classical Indian Buddhism*, and co-editing an interdisciplinary volume entitled *The Tantric World* (Routledge, forthcoming 2026). Previously, she was Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Buddhism Public Scholar at the National Museum of

Asian Art, Smithsonian (2022-2024), where she curated the online exhibition *Wisdom of the Goddess*. Her peer-reviewed articles include "Gender Equity in a Mahayana Sutra: The *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s Goddesses" (*The Eastern Buddhist*, 2021) and "Gifts of the Goddess: Offerings of *Dhāraṇī*, Mantras, and Tantric Invocation Rituals in the *Sūtra of Golden Light*" (*Pacific World*, 2022).

