



Newsletter Archives

The Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism A Study in Spiritual Evolution

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The Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism - A Study in Spiritual Evolution

Article of the Month - October 2003



A constant intriguing factor in the imagery of the Great Buddha is the group of three curving conch-like lines on his neck. In the varied world of Buddhist art this is one common characteristic that shines across all aesthetic traditions. Like other Buddhist motifs, it too is soaked in rich spiritual symbolism. It is said to represent Buddha's deep and resonant voice, through which he introduced his followers to the path of dharma.

The association of the conch shell with Buddha's melodious voice, sweet with the tenor of his uplifting message, has both an archetypal simplicity and universal appeal. It is a hard-hitting symbol which associates a primordial object (deemed sacred in all ancient traditions) with the actual physical body of the Buddha. Indeed, though much of Buddhist philosophy is esoteric, when it comes to aesthetics, Buddhist art is justly famous for giving a physical, easily recognizable representation to abstract philosophical truths.

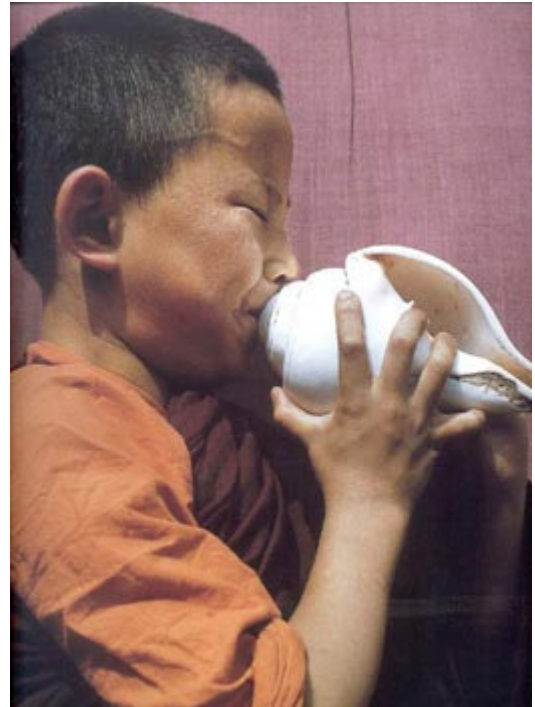
Buddhism has evolved over the centuries a complex, yet discernable scheme of symbolism which has found adequate expression in Buddhist art. Undoubtedly, the most popular of such symbols is the group of eight, known in Sanskrit as 'Ashtamangala,' ashta meaning eight and mangala meaning auspicious. Each of these symbols is also individually associated with the physical form of the Buddha.

These eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism (Tib. bkra shis rtags brgyad) are:

- 1). A Conch Shell
- 2). A Lotus
- 3). A Wheel
- 4). A Parasol (Umbrella)
- 5). An Endless Knot
- 6). A Pair of Golden Fishes
- 7). A Banner Proclaiming Victory
- 8). A Treasure Vase

The Conch Shell (Skt. shankha; Tib. dung dkar):

The conch shell has survived as the original horn trumpet since time immemorial. Ancient Indian epics describe how each hero of mythical warfare carried a mighty white conch shell, which often bore a personal name. It is one of the main emblems of Vishnu, and his conch bears the name of Panchajanya, meaning 'having control over the five classes of beings.' Arjuna's (hero of the Mahabharata) mighty conch was known as Devadatta, whose triumphant blast brought terror to the enemy. As a proclaiming battle horn, the conch is akin to the bugle. It is an emblem of power, authority and sovereignty whose blast is believed to banish evil spirits, avert natural disasters, and scare away poisonous creatures. Today, in its greatly tamed avatar, the conch is used in Tibetan Buddhism to call together religious assemblies. During the actual practise of rituals, it is used both as a musical instrument and as a container for holy water.

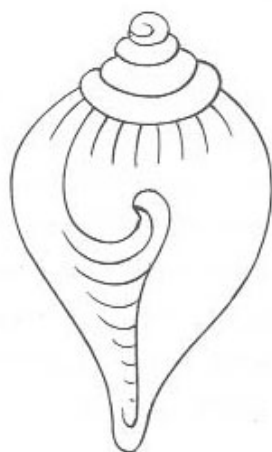


Ancient Indian belief classifies the conch into male and female varieties. The thicker-shelled bulbous one is thought to be the male (purusha), and the thin-shelled slender conch to be the female (shankhini).

The fourfold caste division is also applied as follows:

- a). The smooth white conch represents the Brahmin caste
- b). The red conch the kshatriyas (warriors)
- c). The yellow conch the vaishyas (merchants)
- d). The grey conch the shudras (labourers)

Additionally, there is a fundamental classification of conch shells occurring in nature: those that turn to the left and those which turn to the right.

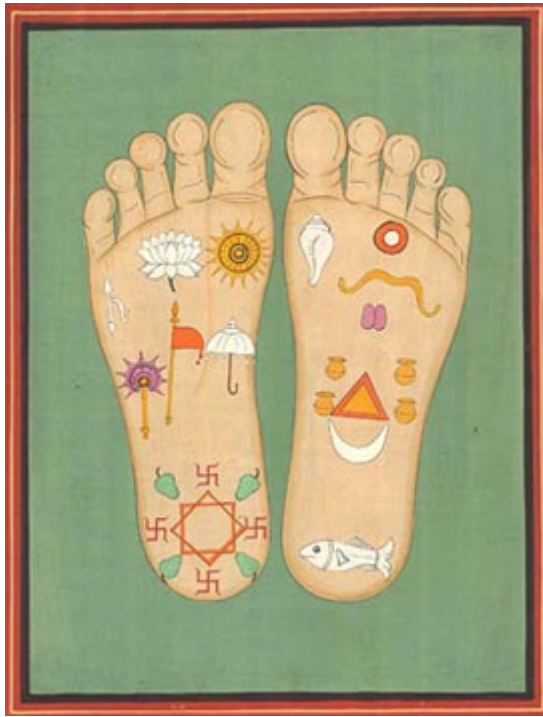


The left turning Conch



The right turning Conch

Shells which spiral to the right in a clockwise direction are a rarity and are considered especially sacred. The right-spiralling movement of such a conch is believed to echo the celestial motion of the sun, moon, planets and stars across the heavens. The hair whorls on Buddha's head spiral to the right, as do his fine body hairs, the long curl between his eyebrows (urna), and also the conch-like swirl of his navel.



Vajrayana Buddhism absorbed the conch as a symbol which fearlessly proclaimed the truth of the dharma. Among the eight symbols, it stands for the fame of the Buddha's teaching, which spreads in all directions like the sound of the conch trumpet.

In addition to Buddha's throat, the conch also appears as an auspicious mark on the soles, palms, limbs, breast or forehead of a divinely endowed being.

The Lotus (Skt. padma; Tib. pad ma):

The lotus does not grow in Tibet and so Tibetan art has only stylized versions of it. Nevertheless, it is one of Buddhism's best recognized motifs since every important deity is associated in some manner with the lotus, either being seated upon it or holding one in their hands.

The roots of a lotus are in the mud, the stem grows up through the water, and the heavily scented flower lies above the water, basking in the sunlight. This pattern of growth signifies the progress of the soul from the primeval mud of materialism, through the waters of experience, and into the bright sunshine of enlightenment. Though there are other water plants that bloom above the water, it is only the lotus which, owing to the strength of its stem, regularly rises eight to twelve inches above the surface.



Thus says the Lalitavistara, 'the spirit of the best of men is spotless, like the lotus in the muddy water which does not adhere to it.' According to another scholar, 'in esoteric Buddhism, the heart of the beings is like an unopened lotus: when the virtues of the Buddha develop therein, the lotus blossoms; that is why the Buddha sits on a lotus bloom.'

Significantly, the color of the lotus too has an important bearing on the symbology associated with it:

1). White Lotus (Skt. pundarika; Tib. pad ma dkar po): This represents the state of spiritual perfection and total mental purity (bodhi). It is associated with the White Tara and proclaims her perfect nature, a quality which is reinforced by the color of her body.

2). Red Lotus (Skt. kamala; Tib. pad ma chu skyes): This signifies the original nature and purity of the heart (hrdya). It is the lotus of love, compassion, passion and all other qualities of the heart. It is the flower of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

3). Blue Lotus (Skt. utpala; Tib. ut pa la): This is a symbol of the victory of the spirit over the senses, and signifies the wisdom of knowledge. Not surprisingly, it is the preferred flower of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom.

4). Pink Lotus (Skt. padma; Tib. pad ma dmar po): This the supreme lotus, generally reserved for the highest deity. Thus naturally it is associated with the Great Buddha himself.

The Wheel (Skt. chakra; Tib. 'khor lo):



The Eight-Spoked Dharma Wheel

The wheel consists of three basic parts: the hub, the rim, and spokes (generally eight in number). Its underlying form is that of a circle, which is recognized across all traditions as a shape that is complete and perfect in itself, qualities which inform the teachings of the Buddha too.

Individually, the rim represents the element of limitation, the hub is the axis of the world, and the eight spokes denote the Eightfold Path set down by the Buddha, which leads to the cessation of all suffering.

A further esoteric interpretation makes reference to the three trainings which form an integral part of Buddhist meditative practice, associating each of the three parts

of the wheel with one such practice. This symbolism is as follows:

- a). The hub stands for training in moral discipline. Through this practise the mind is supported and stabilized. Thus it is the practise of moral discipline that upholds our meditation, just like the supporting axis of the world.
- b). The spokes stand for the correct application of wisdom, which cuts off ignorance and ends suffering.
- c). The rim denotes concentration, which holds the entire meditative practise together, just as the wheel of life is held together by its rim.

The wheel evolved as a symbol of the Buddha's teachings and as an emblem of the Chakravartin or 'wheel turner,' identifying the wheel as the Dharmachakra or 'wheel of law.' The Tibetan term for Dharmachakra (chos kyi'khor lo) literally means 'the wheel of transformation.' The wheel's swift motion serves as an apt metaphor for the rapid spiritual change engendered by the teachings of the Buddha.

Hence, Buddha's first discourse at the Deer Park in Sarnath is known as the 'first turning of the wheel of dharma.' Likewise, his subsequent discourses at Rajgir and Shravasti are known as the 'second and third turnings of the wheel of dharma.'

The Parasol (Skt. chattra; Tib. gdugs):

Above the mountain is the dome of the sky. This is symbolized by the umbrella, whose important function is to cast a shadow, the shadow of protection. The dictionary defines a parasol as an umbrella used for protection from the sun. Thus its function is to protect exclusively from the heat rather than the rain - as the word 'parasol,' meaning 'to hold off the sun,' and 'umbrella,' meaning 'little shade,' similarly imply. The Sanskrit term 'chattra,' also means 'mushroom,' in an obvious reference to its shape.

The parasol or umbrella is a traditional Indian symbol of both protection and royalty. The ability to protect oneself against inclement weather has always, in all cultures, been a status symbol. In Europe, until a few decades ago, a sunshade was a status symbol for society ladies. In Oriental thought, the fact that it protected the bearer from the scorching heat of the sun was transferred into the religious sphere as a "protection against the heat of defilements." Thus the coolness of its shade symbolizes protection from the heat of suffering, desire, and other spiritually harmful forces.



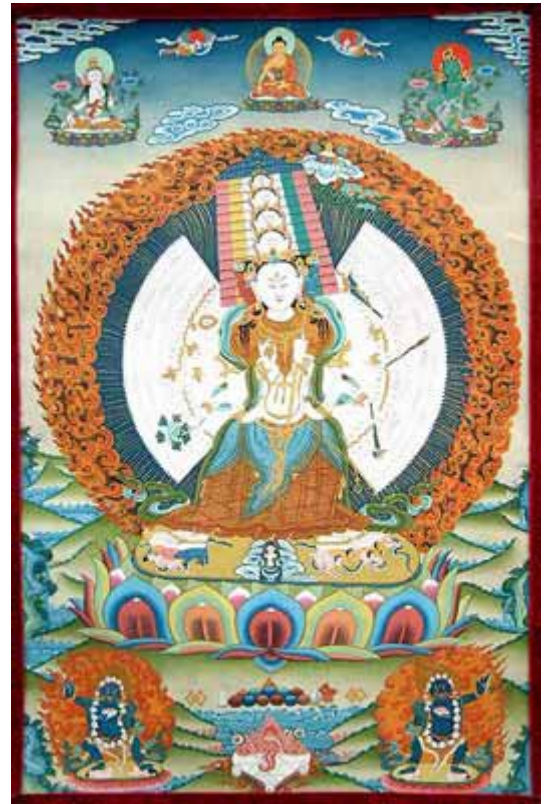
The Tibetan Parasol



The dome of the umbrella is held aloft by a vertical handle (just like the mountain upholds the sky), which is identified with the 'axis mundi,' or the central axis upholding the world. The umbrella is carried above an important dignitary or the image of a deity, to indicate that the person or symbol below the umbrella is in fact the center of the universe, and also its spiritual support. Umbrellas seem to be especially important in processional rites, being like mobile temples. Thus, depictions of the Buddha often display an elaborate and large umbrella above his head.

As it is held above the head it naturally symbolizes honor and respect. In Vajrayana Buddhism, this large umbrella (atapatra) was even deified into the thousand-armed, -footed goddess Sitapatra, whose name literally means 'the white umbrella.'

In Tibet, depending on their status, various dignitaries were entitled to different parasols, with religious heads being entitled to a silk one and secular rulers to a parasol with embroidered peacock feathers. Exalted personalities such as the Dalai Lama are entitled to both, and in processions, first a peacock parasol and then a silk one is carried after him.



The Tibetan version of the parasol was adopted from its royal Indian and Chinese prototypes, and fashioned from a wooden, spoked frame with a domed silk cover and hanging silk pendants making up an overhanging skirt.

The dome symbolizes wisdom, and the hanging skirt, compassion. Thus the composite form of the parasol signifies the union of these dual elements.

Octagonal and square parasols are also common, representing the Noble Eightfold Path and the four directional quarters respectively.

The Endless Knot (Skt. shrivatsa; Tib. dpal be'u):

The endless knot is a closed, graphic ornament composed of right-angled, intertwined lines. It is conjectured that it may have evolved from an ancient naga symbol with two stylized snakes.



This latter image signifies the dramatic interplay and interaction of the opposing forces in the dualistic world of manifestation, leading to their union, and ultimately to harmony in the universe. This fact is amply reflected in the symmetrical and regular form of the endless knot.

The intertwining of lines reminds us how all phenomena are conjoined and yoked together as a closed cycle of cause and effect. Thus the whole composition is a pattern that is closed on in itself with no gaps, leading to a representational form of great simplicity and fully balanced harmony.

Since all phenomena are interrelated, the placing of the endless knot on a gift or greeting card is understood to establish an auspicious connection between the giver and the recipient. At the same time, the recipient is goaded to righteous karma, being reminded that future positive effects have their roots in the causes of the present. This is because the knot represents a connection, a link with our fates, binding us to our karmic destiny. Not surprisingly, this is one of the most favorite symbols in Tibetan Buddhism, and often occurs independently on its own.

Since the knot has no beginning or end it also symbolizes the infinite wisdom of the Buddha.



The Golden Fishes (Skt. suvarnamatsya; Tib. gser nya):



This symbol consists of two fishes, which usually appear standing vertically with heads turned inwards towards each other.

The pair of fishes originated as an ancient pre-Buddhist symbol of the two sacred rivers of India, Ganga and Yamuna. Symbolically, these two rivers represent the lunar and solar channels, which originate in the nostrils and carry the alternating rhythms of breath or prana. In Buddhism, the golden fishes symbolize happiness, as they have complete freedom in water. They represent fertility and abundance as they multiply very rapidly. Fish often swim in pairs, and in China they represented conjugal unity and fidelity, where a pair of fishes would often be given as a wedding present.

Both Jesus Christ and Buddha are known as 'fisher of men,' because they save mortals from the ocean of suffering.

The Victory Banner (Skt. dhvaja; Tib. rgyal mtshan):

In Sanskrit, the banner or sign of victory is known as the dhvaja, meaning standard, flag or ensign. Originally, the victory banner was a military standard carried in ancient Indian warfare, and bore the specific insignia of its champion. For example in the Mahabharata, Krishna's chariot was adorned with a banner showing the image of the monkey-god Hanuman.

The victory banner was adopted by early Buddhism as an emblem of the Buddha's enlightenment, heralding the triumph of knowledge over ignorance. It is said to have been placed on the summit of Mt. Meru by Buddha himself, symbolizing his victory over the entire universe. Again, Mount Meru here is believed to be the central axis supporting the world.

The flag of victory also denotes Buddha's triumph over Mara, who personifies hindrances on the path to spiritual realization. Specifically, there are said to be four types of Maras, each one representing an individual hurdle on the path to spiritual progress. These are:

- 1). The Mara of Emotional Defilement
- 2). Mara of Passion
- 3). Mara of the Fear of Death
- 4). Mara of Pride and Lust

It was only after conquering these four negative traits that Buddha could proclaim victory over ignorance, and achieve nirvana.

Cylindrical victory banners made of beaten copper are traditionally placed at the four corners of monastery and temple roofs. These signify the Buddha's victorious dharma radiating to the four directions and also his triumph over the four Maras mentioned above.



The Treasure Vase (Skt. *nidhana kumbha*; Tib. *gter gyi bum pa*):



The Vase of Inexhaustible Treasures

The vase is a fat-bellied vessel with a short, slim neck. On top, at the opening, there is a large jewel indicating that it is a treasure vase.

Its symbolic meaning was almost always associated with the ideas of storage and the satisfaction of material desires. In the sagas and fairytales of many different cultures, for example, there is the recurring idea of an inexhaustible vessel.

Physically, the 'vase of inexhaustible treasures' is modelled on the traditional Indian clay water pot or kumbha with a flat base, round body, narrow neck and fluted upper rim. However much is removed from it, this vase remains perpetually full. Wealth

vases, sealed with precious and sacred substances, are commonly placed upon altars and on mountain passes, or buried at water springs, where their presence is believed to attract wealth and bring harmony to the environment. In relation to Buddhism it specifically means the spiritual abundance of the Buddha, a treasure that did not diminish, however much of it he gave away.

The question still remains of the association of these eight symbols with the Buddha's actual physical body. An ancient text called the Heap of Good Fortune Sutra (*Aryamangalakutanama-mahayanasutra*),

while addressing the Buddha, has this to say on the issue:

*Veneration to you with your head like a protecting parasol,
With eyes like the precious golden fishes (even today a woman with beautiful eyes is known as 'minakshi,'
meaning one with fish-like eyes)
With neck like a precious, adorned vase of good fortune,
With speech like a right-turning Dharma shell,
With a mind infinite with wisdom like the never ending knot,
With a tongue open like the auspicious pink lotus,
With a body proclaiming triumph over the attacking armies of Mara,
With feet that tread the path of dharma like the auspicious wheel.*

Artistically, these motifs may be depicted individually, in pairs, in fours, or as a composite group of eight. Designs of these eight symbols adorn all manner of sacred and secular Buddhist objects, such as carved wooden furniture, metalwork, wall panels, carpets and silk brocades.

They are also frequently drawn on the ground in sprinkled flour or colored powders to welcome visiting religious dignitaries. Indeed, no Tibetan ceremony, be it religious or secular (for e.g. a marriage), is complete without some depiction of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism, which are believed to propitiate the environment and grant protection to the activity being undertaken.



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This article by Nitin Kumar
Editor
<http://www.exoticindia.com>

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