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# Buddhist Symbols and Imageries

In general Buddhism has always distrusted the ability of ordinary language adequately to express truths about ultimate realities, and hence has taken frequent recourse to symbols and imageries to deal with them. Such symbols and imageries in Buddhism may be classified into five groups: doctrinal, mythical, cultic, iconographic and conventional. In the present article we shall make a survey of these five groups of Buddhist symbols and imageries.\*

## 1. Doctrinal Symbols and Imageries

The Buddha declared the questions about the nature of ultimate realities to be unanswerable (*avyākṛta-vastūni*). Among such questions he included those concerning the ultimate nature of the universe, the

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\* The main works that have been consulted for the preparation of this article are:

- (1) Abbate F. ed., Richardson J. tra., *Indian Art and the Art of Ceylon, Central and South-East Asia*. London: Octopus Books Limited, 1972.
- (2) Coomaraswamy A. K., and Nivedita S. *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967.
- (3) Deneck M. *Indian Art*. London: Paul Hamlyn Limited, 1967.
- (4) Gupte R.S. *Iconography of the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd., 1980.
- (5) Haldar J. R. *Early Buddhist Mythology*. New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1977.
- (6) Ross N. W. *Three ways of Asian Wisdom*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1966.
- (7) Silva-Vigier A. De. *The Life of the Buddha*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1955.
- (8) Simpson W. *The Buddhist Praying Wheel*, New Delhi: Oriental Publishers and Distributors, 1978.
- (9) Sivaramamurti C. *Panoram of Jain Art*. New Delhi: Times of India, 1983.
- (10) *The Way of the Buddha*. Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

self, and the state of *nirvāna*. All the same, he had definite answers to them, which he conveyed rather indirectly through symbols and imageries. Even as a matter of methodology, he would not indulge in speculations about the non-empirical world, in which he certainly believed. Instead, he would depict the empirical world so vividly through symbols and imageries from which anybody could make reasonable inferences about the non-empirical one. It is more or less clear that he had accepted the *Sāṃkhyan* world-view as the philosophical frame of his teaching, although he would not say so in explicit terms. Admitting the *puruṣa-prakṛti* complex to be the totality of reality, he undertook to describe the *prakṛti*, which stands for the empirical world. Of course, here again he does not use the *Sāṃkhyan* terminology, but his own. The *Sāṃkhyan* as well as the Buddhist start on a pessimistic note, that whatever the empirical world offers is suffering, *duḥkha*, of one kind or another. Then both of them propose hopeful ways and means for man to liberate himself from his world of suffering. Thus, in the final analysis, both of them turn out to be optimists and messengers of liberation.

In Buddhism three powerful symbols are employed to portray the predicamental character of the empirical world. They are: an old man, a sick man and a dead body. Meeting them one after another, the Buddha is said to have been led to the conclusion that the empirical world is all suffering (*duḥkha*), transitory (*anitya*) and non-substantial (*anātma*). Here, old age, sickness and death are made the signs of the threefold characteristic of the empirical world: suffering, transitoriness and non-substantiality. Thus, instead of employing metaphysical arguments to establish the ultimately unsatisfactory nature of the empirical world, the Buddha is directly pointing to three undeniably concrete situations—old age, sickness and death—which convey in absolute terms, so to say, the character of the world to which they belong. The use of such terms was very much part of the Buddha's effective pedagogy, indeed.

Thus, once the empirical world has been described as suffering, transitory and non-substantial, it is only a matter of logical inference to say that the non-empirical world, *nirvāna*, is rid of suffering, transitoriness and non-substantiality. It would further entail that *nirvāna* is a world of joy, stability and substantiality. This is the world of *purusa* (spirit), to use the *Sāṃkhyan* terminology, to obtain which man should first renounce the *prakṛti*, the empirical world.

This fact is brought home in Buddhism through the imagery of a *sannyāsin*, a mendicant, whom the Buddha is said to have met following the depressing sights of the old man, the sick man, and the dead body. The sight of the *sannyāsin* reassured the Buddha that there was a way out of the transitory and non-substantial world of suffering: it is the way of renunciation of which the *sannyāsin* is a symbol. As soon as one controls the desire (*tyṣṇā*) for the psychophysical factors—which are called the *skhandhas*, which constitute the empirical world and thus realizes the state of detachment, one becomes liberated once and for all, which is itself *nirvāna*. This is the message of Buddhism conveyed through the image of a *sannyāsin*.

Man's attempt to detach himself from the empirical world is bound to involve a fierce struggle and internal conflict. The attractions of the nature (*prakṛti*), and the force of the ego (*aham*) which is the fundamental drive of the nature, are so strong that a man sincerely wanting to liberate himself inevitably experiences a painful conflict within himself between the forces of the spirit and the nature. The image of *Māra* in Buddhism stands for the force of the nature against which one has to fight a terrible battle before achieving the liberation. This was indeed the experience of the Buddha himself during the course of his efforts to Buddhahood, the enlightenment, which is the positive dimension of *nirvāna*. *Māra*, the killer, is the personification of all the psycho-physical forces that constantly try to keep man bound to the empirical existence and thus to prevent him from achieving the state of detachment which is necessary for, and even identical with, the experience of *nirvāna*. Buddhist literature has described in detailed mythical language the Buddha's struggle with *Māra*, to which we shall refer again in the next section.

Later on, the illusory character of the empirical world was described in Buddhism using figurative expressions like *santāna* and *saṃghāta*, a stream and an aggregate. The former term illustrates the transitoriness of the world: just as a stream of water is constantly changing so that it is ever a new reality, so the world as a whole and everything in it is in a state of flux. The world is a series (*vīthi*) of momentary (*ksanika*) events that come into being and disappear instantaneously. The wheel of existence (*bhava-chakra*), which is another symbolic expression in Buddhism, is moving so fast that the observer mistakes it for a static reality. This may be compared to the experience one has in watching a motionpicture. One does not

realize the fact that what is projected on to the screen before him is only a series of momentary images creating the illusion of enduring objects. The empirical world is a process, a becoming (*bhava*), rather than a finished entity (*sat*) or an absolute non-entity (*asat*). The terms *sat* and *asat* seem to represent the two prevailing views at that time about the world. Using the imageries of *santāna*, *vithi*, *bhava-chakra* and *bhava* the Buddha created a new picture of the world as a process full of dynamism. Of course, this was only a new version of the *Sāṃkhyan* understanding of *prakṛti* as an ever evolving principle. The merit of Buddhism is that using lively and concrete symbols and imageries it has made the picture more intelligible and appealing to the common man.

The above-mentioned imageries of *santāna* etc., helped the Buddhist to understand the world under the category of time, while that of *samghāta*, meaning an aggregate, has been used to understand the same world under the category of space. While in terms of time the world is momentary, in terms of space it is an aggregate of so many infinitesimal psycho-physical elements called *dharmas*. It is an illusion to say that there is an enduring bond between them, and a grave mistake to identify the spirit with any one or more of those elements. All of them, individually as well as collectively, are non-self (*anatma*). In the case of man what unites the psycho-physical elements is the ego-consciousness (*aham-kara*), which, according to the *Sāṃkhyan* scheme, is merely the self-assertion of the *prakṛti*. The man in *samsara* mistakes this ego-consciousness, otherwise called the individuality, for the spirit (*purusa*). This is the basic bondage from which man is suffering, and, therefore, in order to liberate himself, he must be brought to the state of awareness that the ego is not a substantial entity, that it is not the self, and that it is only a name for the aggregate of the psycho-physical elements in man.

That the individuality (*aham*) is not a single enduring entity, but only an aggregate (*samghata*) of so many psycho-physical elements, has been illustrated by the analogy of a chariot, cited in one of the early Buddhist texts called *Milindapanha*. What is a chariot? It is neither the pole, nor the axle, nor the wheels, nor the frame, nor the reins, nor the yoke, nor the spokes, nor the goads, taken singly. A chariot is rather an aggregate of all these component parts. There is no chariot as such, as an entity apart from the parts. At the same time, none of the parts individually taken is the chariot. Hence, "chariot"

is the name given to the collection or aggregate of various parts arranged in a certain order and proportion. Similarly, the individuality (ego) of man is only a name given to the aggregate of so many psycho-physical elements arranged in a certain order and proportion which form the empirical man. The empirical man is not an entity over and above the psycho-physical elements: the elements which constitute the body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedana*), perceptions (*saṃjñā*), consciousness (*viññāna*) and dispositions (*saṃskāra*). All these elements are, singly as well as collectively, non-self (*anatma*), and therefore, to identify the self with any one or more of them is a folly on the part of man, and such identification amounts to the bondage of man.

In the course of the history of Buddhist thought, many of its key terms became rather symbols of certain ideals. Such of these terms are: *Buddha*, *dharma*, *sangha*, *bodhisattva*, *sūnyatā*, *tathatā* and *nirvāṇa*. They became symbols in the sense that, losing their original and literal meanings, they came to signify the ideals of Buddhist philosophy. *Buddha*, *dharma* and *sangha* which are the three articles of the Buddhist creed, initially referred, respectively, to the founder, teaching, and the religious order of Buddhism. Gradually the term *buddha* came to be the symbol of human perfection: "The Buddha is the type of the ideal of man, the muni, the nibbutaman. Not as an individual, however, is he to be venerated, but simply as the ideal man, the type."<sup>1</sup> Still later, it became the symbol of the Absolute, the three forms: *dharma-kaya*, *sambhoga-kaya*, and *nirmana-kaya*, meaning respectively, the abstract, heavenly and historical forms. Similarly, the term *dharma* has now become the symbol of the Buddhist message as a whole, in its practical as well as theoretical aspects; *sangha* the symbol of the Buddhist ideal of human society; *bodhisattva*, literally meaning 'a being possessed of *bodhi* (enlightenment)', is the symbol of the Buddhist virtues of friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity; *sūnyata*, meaning emptiness, is in later Buddhism the symbol of the ineffability of reality; while *tathata*, meaning suchness, symbolizes its transcendence; and *nirvāṇa* has now become a symbol of the ideal state of existence which is at once peaceful and dynamic.

1. Trevor Ling, *A History of Religion East and West*, (London: The Mac-Millan Press Ltd., 1968), p.92.

## 2. Mythic Symbols and Imageries

Initially Buddhism was very much a humanistic movement, advocating a way of personal development by one's own efforts, making little reference to rituals and mythical figures. The Buddha attempted to explain the human experiences purely in psycho-physical terms so that he did not have ever to invoke a 'ghost out of machine.' He diagnosed the illness of man to be psychic, caused by desire (*tr̥sna*), and accordingly prescribed a psycho-therapy, which by itself did not sound particularly religious, and still less mythical.

But before long the zealous followers of the Buddha garbed his message in colourful myths. These served as symbols for them to interpret the Buddha's personality and message. Their immediate preoccupation was to show that Buddhism had superseded Hinduism. For this they made up clever stories depicting the Hindu gods, including the creator Brahma, as inferior to the Buddha. For example, the Hindu gods, including Brahmā, Vishnu, Siva and Indra, are said to have come down to earth to pay homage to the new-born Gautama, the would-be-Buddha; some of them received the infant in a golden net, some others took him in an antelope-skin to his mother; Brahma, Siva and Indra witnessed the first bath of the infant, given by the *nāga* kings, who also belonged to the Hindu pantheon; in some versions Brahma and Indra are said to have themselves given the first bath to the infant Gautama.

Later, Brahmā is shown to have appeared before Gautama, immediately after the latter's enlightenment to plead with him to teach the newly discovered doctrine to mankind. Brahmā is said to have argued that if the enlightened Gautama refrained from teaching his doctrine, the whole world would be lost.

Again, at the moment of the Buddha's death, the *maha-parinirvna*, Indra and other gods are depicted as descending from heaven to welcome him to heaven. These and other such stories are symbols signifying that the Hindu world was made to accept the Buddha as the supreme Lord. Buddhism accepted the Hindu understanding of the cosmos as divided into heavens, earth and hells; it also accepted most of the Hindu gods and goddesses, spirits and quasidivine beings, and added a few more. But the traditionally assigned positions of the Hindu divinities were reconsidered, and all of them, including the

members of the Hindu triad, were demoted to positions inferior to the Buddha.

Moreover, the Buddhist disciples made up stories symbolizing the supra-human personality of the Master. Such stories are mythical descriptions of the birth, enlightenment, public ministry and death of the Buddha. Among them the birth stories are particularly interesting: The would-be-Buddha, known as *Buddhisattva*, was in *tusita* heaven, when the gods informed him that it was time for him to take a human birth. He then chose queen Maya as his mother, and in the form of a beautiful six-tusked white elephant entered her womb through her right side, while she was asleep dreaming about this event. When the Buddha was thus miraculously conceived, the earth shook, and the entire universe was illumined. Astrologers predicted that the child would become either a monarch of the whole world (*chakra-varti*) or the Buddha. Then, at the end of the tenth lunar month, the *Boddhisattva* was born, not in the usual manner, but the infant coming out through the right side of the mother, who was then standing in a pleasure garden supporting herself with her right hand on the branch of a *sāla* tree. At this birth there was great rejoicing among gods and men, and the former descended from heaven to witness the event. As soon as the child was born, hot and cold showers of water fell from heaven in which the mother and the child were bathed. Then the child stood firm on his feet, and took seven steps each to the four directions, a white canopy appearing over his head, and lotuses protecting his feet. He then declared with 'a lion's roar' his supreme Lordship over the entire world. Queen Maya died seven days after the child was born, for it was not proper for the mother of the *Boddhisattva* to give birth to another child. Later, during his public ministry, the Buddha visited his mother in heaven and conveyed to her and all the heavenly beings his new message of salvation, *nirvāna*.

Asita, a Himalayan sage who visited the child, recognized him to be the would-be-Buddha, but regretted that he would not live to listen to the Buddha's preaching. Five days after birth the child was named Siddhartha at a ceremony officiated by 108 Brahmin priests. Among them, Kaundinya noticing the bodily marks of the boy definitively prophesied Buddhahood for him.

The Great Departure of the *Boddhisattva* at the age of 21 to undergo ascetical life has also come to us in mythical narratives: he

was attended by gods; some of them held an umbrella over his head; some others muffled the horse's hooves so that they may not produce sound; and some others noiselessly opened the gates of the city. On the way the Boddhisattva, assisted by gods, cut off his hair, which was respectfully received by the gods in a tray of flowers, and carried to heaven where the festival of hair (*cūḍāmaha*) was celebrated in the assembly of gods. As it was time for the horse, Kanthala, and the charioteer, Chandaka, to return to the palace, the former licked the feet of the Master with tears in the eyes, and the latter unwillingly bid him farewell.

The Boddhisattva, following the advice of the traditional Hindu teachers, started practising severe austerities, which eventually proved to be too much for him. Then, deciding to change to more reasonable forms of asceticism with greater emphasis on mental concentration, he accepted rice pudding from a girl called Sujata. The golden vessel in which she offered it to him was thrown into the river *neranjana* and it was caught by a snake-god from whom it was snatched by Sakara, the chief of gods, in the disguise of an eagle, and was carried to *tusita* heaven to be worshipped by the heavenly beings. Men as well as gods are depicted carrying pitchers full of water from the river *neranjana*, in which the Boddhisattva took a bath, and the *naga-gods* worshipping his footprints on the sandy bank of the same river.

There are also fantastic mythological descriptions symbolizing the fierce inner struggle the Boddhisattva is believed to have put up immediately before the enlightenment. As he approached the boddhi-tree, under which he was to attain the enlightenment, it rejoiced, cast jewels at his feet, and wished him complete success; the other divinities of the tree also showered flowers and sprinkled perfumes about him, and encouraged him! But along with these friendly beings there were also Māra, the tempter, and his armies of demons, monsters and wild beasts with bows and arrows, clubs and other deadly weapons. Māra caused a violent wind and earthquake letting loose a shower of rocks, fire and glowing ashes. But the Boddhisattva remained unharmed. Then Māra and his hosts discharged fast moving arrows and other missile-like weapons, which on reaching the Boddhisattva were miraculously turned into flowers. The infuriated Māra then instructed his three sexy daughters to seduce the Boddhisattva. Their efforts, too, utterly failed, and they returned



wishing the Boddhisattva every success in his mission. Finally, Māra himself appeared before the Boddhisattva to make a last attempt. He challenged the latter's claim to enlightenment. In response to this challenge the Boddhisattva, touching the earth with his right hand, called upon the earth goddess. Suddenly she appeared and declared herself to be witness to the Boddhisattva's claim, which thundered like a cosmic drum. On hearing this Māra admitted his defeat, and left the Boddhisattva.

Next come the stories connected with the enlightenment experience of the Boddhisattva. Māra had been defeated before sunset. The Boddhisattva continued his meditation more intensively under the boddhi-tree. Then during the night he experienced enlightenment step by step: in the first watch of the night he remembered the series of his past births one after another; in the second watch his yogic eye was opened with which he saw, as though in a spotless mirror, the inner secrets of the universe he saw that one's present life was determined by one's past *Karma*; and in the third watch he saw more deeply into the mechanism of the universe and the cause and source of suffering, and passed through the eight successive stages of meditation. This was the fulness of enlightenment at which brilliant rays of all colours radiated from the Buddha's body, penetrating all the worlds, signalling his attainment of Buddhahood. The event was accompanied also by other miracles. In the days that followed the Buddha had clear vision of all that was to happen to him during the rest of his life. Six weeks after the enlightenment he was sitting by the lake called Muchalinda, when there occurred a torrential rain causing floods. Then a snake by the same name as the lake protected the Buddha from the floods and rain, which went on for seven days, by winding its coil seven times under the Buddha's seat to raise it, and holding up its hood like an umbrella over his head.

The Buddha's public ministry also has been recorded as studded with miraculous events, all symbolizing the belief in his supra-human powers and personality. He is reported to have won over to his message even those who were opposing him at first. This he did, it is believed, by the sheer power of his loving kindness (*maitri*), which penetrated and transformed the minds and hearts of men and animals even at a distance. His first audience included the five monks who had left him, taking offence at his rather unconventional

manner of asceticism. They naturally did not feel like recognizing his claim to enlightenment. However, the loving kindness that radiated from him soon converted them into the first members of the Buddhist Order called *Sangha*. Devout Buddhists believe that the first sermon was attended by thousands of earthly and heavenly beings, including the natural phenomena and animals who were present at the spot at least invisibly. After the first sermon the Buddha went about preaching the new message, supporting it with miracles and signs. Before the Sakya princes, who refused to pay him homage, the Buddha rose into the air with his body from which issued streams of water and then flames of fire; the water quenched the thirst of the devotees while the fire did not burn even a straw. On another occasion the Buddha was miraculously transported to *tavatimsa* heaven, where his mother was, and he disclosed the new message of liberation to all heavenly beings. His return to earth is also described in mythical language.

Many are the stories of miraculous conversions. The conversion of Nanda, a half-brother of the Buddha, was accomplished when he was miraculously carried to heaven. The Buddha's own son Rahula, although at first he did not have any idea of joining the Buddhist Order, later, as if under the spiritual power of the Buddha, accepted the ordination of a monk. The Buddha, knowing that his father, Suddhodana, was ill, travelled to Kapilavastu in the air, and there preached the message to him; the latter became an *arhat* before he died. A group of heretical teachers, who challenged the Buddha's superiority, was confounded at *Sravāsti* by a great miracle in which the Buddha multiplied his images, one above another, till the series touched heaven.

Animals, like an elephant and a monkey, are believed to have offered food and drink to the Buddha. On one occasion the Buddha miraculously saved himself from the attack of a demon named Alvara, who subsequently was converted to Buddhism. The conversion of the robber named Angulimāla, so called because he wore a garland (*māla*) of fingers (*anguli*) of people whom he had robbed and murdered, is very popular among the Buddhists.

Srigupta, a rich man and a disciple of a heretical teacher, planned to kill the Buddha. To carry out his evil design he invited the Buddha to a meal. On the path the Buddha was to walk, Srigupta had seen to it that there were concealed pits filled with

burning charcoal, and he had also poisoned the food. The Buddha was aware of these traps. Still he did not refuse the invitation. Instead, on the way he miraculously turned the pits into beautiful lakes of lotuses and at the table he purified the food. Seeing these wonders Srigupta took refuge in the Buddha.

Indra is said to have once visited the Buddha to ask for the gift of a prolonged life. On another occasion the Buddha recognized Suka's white dog to be the latter's father. He was reborn as a dog because of his riches and miserly habits. At the request of the Buddha he showed the place where he had buried his riches in his previous birth. The snake king, Elapatra, once came to worship the Buddha. There again, the latter converted the snake god, Apalala who took refuge in him. The men who were sent by his cousin Devadatta, who was a rival of the Buddha, to kill the latter were overcome by the Buddha's compassion, and became his disciples. So, too, a mad elephant called Nalgiri, let loose by Devadatta to trample upon the Buddha, was calmed by the Buddha's benevolence and did him reverence instead of killing him. Once the Buddha and his disciples miraculously crossed the Ganges which was and full to the brim. At the age of seventy-nine the Buddha overcame a severe illness by his own powers. The *sala* trees, among which the Buddha lay immediately before his death, suddenly blossomed although it was not the flowering season. With spirits hovering around his death-bed, he entered the *parinirvana*, coinciding with death. The followers of the Buddha did not feel like lighting his pyre, but finally it burst into flames spontaneously.

### 3. Cultic Symbols and Imageries

Always insisting on self-reliance in one's pursuit of *nirvāna*, the Buddha was opposed to rituals, especially the Brahmanic one. He did not present himself as God, nor did he preach the message of a Creator-God, demanding man's worship. Mental concentration attained through self-discipline was the essence of his teaching. Hence he gave little scope for rituals, and still less for image worship. Moreover, his immediate disciples thought it improper to represent an enlightened person like the Buddha in human forms. Therefore, until about the early Christian century there was no sculptural or pictorial representation of the Buddha. At the same time, the majority of people from the very beginning of Buddhism deve

loped the belief that the Buddha was a divine being, and wanted to worship him as such. For them the Buddha was not merely a clever teacher, but a divine Saviour full of love and compassion. Therefore, what appealed to them was not so much the insistence on self-reliance, as the possibility of taking refuge in his love and compassion. Hence they approached him not merely for wisdom but for grace and protection, and as such they were rather the worshippers of the Buddha than just students or admirers.

The immediate objects of veneration were the things and places associated with the life and activities of the Buddha which, somehow, were believed to be the symbols of his continued presence in the world. Following the cremation of his body, there appeared many claimants to the relics, which were then divided among them. It is said that four of his teeth, the two cheek-bones and the skull were left unconsumed in the pyre. These and many other articles associated with him were eventually enshrined in beautiful monuments called *stupas*, to which we shall refer again later on. Among the relics thus venerated are: embers from the funeral pyre, the iron vessel in which the Buddha's body was cremated, his alms bowl, his head-dress, and hair.

The places that came to be worshipped or considered centres of pilgrimage are: (1) Lumbini Garden in Nepal, where the Buddha was born; (2) Gaya, now known as Buddha Gaya, on the bank of a tributary of the Ganges, where the Buddha attained enlightenment; (3) Sarnath, near *Banaras*, which is the site of the first sermon of the Buddha; and (4) Kusinara, in Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha died, and passed into *parinirvāna*, the final liberation.

Among the above-mentioned places the most important pilgrim centre is Gaya. The Buddha sat there in meditation under a *pipal* or *peepal* tree, now known as the *Bodhi* tree or Bo-tree, meaning the tree of enlightenment. This is the sacred fig tree for Indians in general. Sangamitra, a daughter of Emperor Ashoka is said to have taken one of its shoots to Sri Lanka, and planted it at the famous Buddhist centre Anuradhapura, which is now said to be the oldest tree in the world. As many of its shoots were planted at different Buddhist centres, one was brought also to Gaya to take the place of the original Bo-tree. Pipal leaves, natural as well as artificial, are popularly used for decoration in Buddhist pagodas and centres.

We have already made a reference to the *stupas*, which are the Buddhist reliquaries, or relic chambers. Originally they were burial mounds, but in Buddhism they came to be architectural structures containing the relics of the Buddha and some of his close followers, and as such they are focuses of religious worship. Solidly built with rocks or stone, the *stūpas* are semi-spherical in shape. "The stupa consists of a stone hemisphere representing the universe, raised on one or more platforms and crowned by a series of umbrellas signifying the vault of heavens. The holy ground is enclosed by stone railing of pillars with four gates, or *toranas*, decorated with various reliefs. Basically, the stupa is a development of the ancient burial monument of the Aryan rulers."<sup>2</sup> To undertake to build a *stūpa* has always been considered a highly meritorious act and is generally undertaken jointly by the lay people and the monks. The former provide the finance and other material resources, while the latter supply the necessary relic. As a point of devotional life the *stūpa* is a matter of interest for the religious and the lay sections of the Buddhist population. The main rite at a *stūpa* is the ceremonial circumambulations of it from left to right, which is the common practice of worshipping an Image in India.

In India the most famous *stūpas* are those in Bharhut and Sanchi built by Emperor Ashoka (3rd century B. C.) and later modified by the Maurya rulers (2nd century B. C.). In both places the *stūpas* are outstanding artistically as well as architecturally. On the one hand they are symbols of the faith of the Buddhist followers of the respective centuries, and on the other they are symbols of the Buddha's continued presence in the world. Their enormous size and shape, too, are symbols of the Buddhist optimism that the evil has been conquered by the Buddha, and of the hope that anybody following him can likewise be a conqueror.

The biggest *stūpa* in the world is at Borobudur, Java, Thailand, about which N. W. Ross says, "One of the architectural wonders of the world, the Great Stupa at Borobudur in Java (from 800 A.D.), a magnificent complicated mandala in stone, terraced and galleried in a ritualistic pattern of squares and circles. More than ten miles of sculptured reliefs, designed for the education and edification of circumambulating pilgrims, tell a legend and point a way no longer

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2. Abbate F. ed., *Indian (Art)*, London: Octopus Books 1972), p. 19.

clear in all details even to scholars, although the monument in its entirety is known to represent a microcosmic diagram of the universe Mahayana Buddhist terms.”<sup>3</sup>

In Sri Lanka the *Stūpa* is called Dagoba, or Dāgaba which may be a term derived from Sanskrit *dhatu-garbha*, a relic chamber, in imitation of the Hindu use of the term *garbha-grha* for the ‘sanctuary in a temple. Dāgobas are solid structures of varying sizes, bell-shaped, built of bricks or stones crowned by a short spire, and contain relics. The four monumental Dāgobas at Amradhapura are well-known.

In countries like Burma, China, Japan and Korea the *stupa* is called *pagoda*, which is probably the Burmese derivation of the Singhalese *Dāgoba*. The *pagoda* also is a structure built over Buddhist relics. “In Burma there are countless pagodas, large and small, many of them graceful white-washed conical buildings, from whose spires there hang brass leaves which tinkle in the wind. The Golden Pagoda, Shwe Dagon, in Rangoon stands about 61 metres high, is covered with gold leaf, and contains solid gold statues of the Buddha, as well as countless stone and plaster images in its shrine and courtyards. In China the Buddhist Pagoda which replaced earlier towers, were erected in auspicious places, and always had an odd number of storeys.”

In the absence of any images of the Buddha, painted or sculptured, there were, besides stūpas, other symbolic devices in Buddhism to signify his presence, on which the people could concentrate their devotion. Thus, during the early centuries of Buddhism, it was common to represent the Buddha symbolically through: an empty throne, usually under a Bo-tree, a footprint or a pair of feet, a royal umbrella, a lotus-flower, a *dharma-chakra* (wheel of the Law), a head-dress, and alms bowl. In fact such symbolic representations of the Buddha continued after the Buddha-images began to appear from the early Christian era. Thus, for example, at Sanchi (East Gate Stupa I) in paintings and sculptures of the Great Departure of the Buddha for ascetical life, his presence is indicated by an umbrella held over a prancing riderless horse; the presence of the Buddha in the deerpark at Sarnath delivering the first sermon is signalled by a cushioned

3. N. W. Ross, *Three Ways of Asian Buddhism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, (1966), p. 108.

throne marked with a swastik, an ancient solar symbol; and in another depiction of the same scene at Sanchi (2nd century B.C.) the *dharmachakra* is placed on the throne; on the East and North Gates of the first *Stūpa* at Sanchi, in sculptures showing the Buddha receiving homage from animals, his presence is indicated symbolically through an empty throne beneath a Bo-tree; a piece of work in lime-stone from Amaravati, kept in the British Museum, shows the Buddha being worshipped as a Pillar of Fire of the 2nd century A.D.; a piece of stone-work in Amaravati, coming from 150 A.D. and now kept in the Government Museum, Madras, shows the Buddha's feet being worshipped by female devotees; in the depiction of the Great Departure at Sanchi, mentioned above, the Buddha's feet are shown to represent the Buddha; on the left pillar of the first *Stūpa* in Sanchi is shown the head-dress of the Buddha being worshipped; a piece of stone-work of the 1st century B.C., from Mathura, now kept in the Archaeological Museum, Mathura, and a lime-stone work of the 2nd century A.D., from Amaravati, now kept in the Government Museum Madras, show the Buddha's alms bowl being worshipped; and a piece of stone-work of the 1st century B.C. from Mathura, now kept in the Archaeological Museum, shows the *dharmachakra* being worshipped.

### Iconographic Symbols and Imageries

The history of Buddhist iconography begins towards the end of the first century A.D. The north-western region of India, called Gandhara, was already occupied by the Greeks, following the invasion of the place by Alexander the Great. During the same period there also arrived the Roman traders. Subsequently, the famous Indian Emperor, Ashoka, who was a great supporter of Buddhism, converted the people of this region to Buddhism. Naturally the new converts included a good many of the Greeks and the Romans whose anthropomorphic way of thinking seems to have been largely responsible for the earliest Buddha images, which resemble very much the Hellenistic or the Roman Imperial art of that time. Although the Buddha is represented as a divine man, his human aspect has come to be emphasized more. Represented in hellenistic drapery, the Buddha appears rather like a worldly prince. The *ushnisha* or cranial protrusion, a traditional Indian symbol of divine wisdom, appears merely as a top-knot of hair. The Gandharan images include even the far too realistic representations of the Buddha reduced to a skeleton as a result of severe austerities. And, on the whole, the Gandharan

sculptors with “an awkward stocky appearance and an unnatural stiffness of pose”, and “an almost foppish air” lack the subtle beauty of later Indian work.<sup>4</sup>

Another factor, which explains the sudden appearance of the Buddha images, is the influence of the development of the Mahayana schools of Buddhism, which took on more and more theistic forms, and gradually built up a system of worship in an attempt to make itself more and more popular. It was perhaps more under the Mahayana influence that the Mathura school of art, a contemporary of the Gandharan one, produced the Buddha images.

Gradually the Buddha images took on stereotyped styles and postures, with fixed rules and norms of iconography. It came to be accepted that a Buddha image should bear, as far as possible, the thirty-two major marks (*lakṣaṇas*) and the eighty minor ones. The major ones are :

- 1) Well-set feet, 2) wheels with a thousand spokes and rim on his feet, 3) projecting heels, 4) long fingers, 5) soft hands and feet, 6) netted hands and feet, 7) prominent ankles, 8) antelope limbs, 9) when standing or not stooping his hands reach his knees, 10) the private member is in a sheath, 11) golden colour, 12) soft skin, 13) one hair to each pore of the skin, 14) the hairs of the body are black, rising straight, and curling to the right, 15) very straight of body, 16) even prominences, 17) the front part of his body is like a lion, 18) the space between the shoulders is filled out, 19) his height is equal to his outstretched arms, 20) even shoulders, 21) keen taste, 22) a lion-jaw, 23) forty teeth, 24) even teeth, 25) is not gap-toothed, 26) very white teeth, 27) a large tongue, 28) a voice like Brahmā and as soft as a cuckoo's, 29) very black eyes, 30) eye-lashes like an ox, 31) white hair between the eyebrows, and 32) his head is the shape of a cone (*unhīsaṣīsa*).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, all the marks may not be represented in all images: and indeed some of them are practically impossible to be painted ro

4. Cf. N. W. Ross, *op. cit.*, pp. 100 and 126.

5. E. J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1975) pp. 120-1.



sculptured, for example, the “keen taste” and the “soft voice”. There are two of them, however, which invariably appear on almost all images: (1) the *ushnīsha* a protuberance on the top of the head, symbolizing higher wisdom and enlightenment; and 2) the *ūrṇa*, another protuberance in the centre of the forehead, symbolizing the inner eye of yogic vision. The elongated ear-lobes, which also have become the characteristic marks of the Buddha images, are signs of his royal birth, the supposition being that the kings wear very heavy ear-rings. Some of the later Buddha images have also very large and beautifully decorated haloes, indicating divinity.

The Buddha is commonly depicted either as seated in lotus posture or as standing, and rarely as walking or as reclining except at the time of the final liberation (*parinirvāna*) coinciding with his death. The usual hand-gestures (*hastamudras*) with which he is represented are: (1) *uḥmiṣpar-sa-mudra* (the gesture of touching the earth—the Buddha being seated in lotus-posture, the fingers of his right hand touch the earth, invoking the earth-goddess to bear witness to his claim to enlightenment: (2) *abhayamudra* (gesture of fearlessness)—the right hand with the palm turning outwards is lifted as a sign of protection and assurance; (3) *dharmachakra-mudra* (gesture of the turning of the wheel of law): the hands are raised at chest height, the index finger and the thumb of hand forming circles, the right hand turning inwards, and the left hand outwards, indicating the act of preaching; (4) *dhyāna-mudra* (gesture of meditation)—the hands are laid in the lap, the right over the left, with the palms turning upwards; and—(5) *varda-mudra* (gesture of blessing): the right hand, with the palm turning outwards, is lowered.

In general, the Buddha images are distinguished by the quality of dynamic serenity, smiling lotus-lips, graceful oval face, balanced symmetry, broad chest, broad shoulders, slim waist, raised eye-brows and inward-turning gaze.

### Conventional Symbols

By conventional symbols we mean certain objects that have come to be virtually identified with the Buddha’s personality or message. We shall discuss here two such symbols: the wheel and the lotus. If there is any one symbol which stands for Buddhism as a whole, it is the wheel (*chakra*). It is as central a symbol in Buddhism, as is the

cross in Christianity, or the lunar crescent and the star in Islam. It is probably an improvement on the *swastika*, a solar symbol of fortune adopted by the Jains. The wheel as a symbol frequently appears in Buddhist sculptures and paintings; at Sanchi it is seen at the top of the gateways and the pillars; it appears on all four sides of the famous Lion Capital of Ashoka. In some sculptures devotees are shown worshipping a wheel, which represents the Buddha. Before the Buddha images began to be made, the presence of the Buddha was indicated often by a wheel. The Buddha's feet are believed to have been marked with thousand-spoked wheels, which are traditionally considered to be the marks of greatness and divinity. There are also artistic representations of the Buddha footprints marked with the wheel. Thus from the very early days of Buddhism the wheel became its central symbol.

In India the wheel is a common symbol for power and authority. In the hand of the Hindu god Vishnu it appears as a discus, a weapon of war, by hurling which he is sure to destroy all his foes. The wheel of the Buddha would then symbolize his indomitable power to exterminate the seeds of passions and vices in man, and thus to lead him to the final liberation *nirvāna*.

The wheel is also associated with royal power and authority, probably because it refers to the wheel of the royal chariot. In fact the term *chakra-varti*, literally meaning either 'one residing on a wheel' or 'one moving a wheel', has been used both in the Hindu and Buddhist writings to refer to a monarch of the universe. A *chakra-varti*, by definition is a monarch ruling over the land extending up to the oceans (*asamudraksiti-isa*), and thus indicates the vastness of his territory and authority. The great kings, Ashoka and Chandragupta, were thus called *chakra-vartis*. Marks of the wheel on the soles of a child's feet are believed to indicate that he would become either a monarch of the universe (*chakra-varti*) or an enlightened sage (a Buddha).

The child Gautama who had such marks was predicted to become either a *chakra-varti* or a Buddha. As a matter of fact he became the latter, but in a spiritual sense he became the former, too. As mentioned earlier, it is said that as soon as he was born he walked seven steps in each of the four directions, symbolizing the *dig-vijaya* (conquest of all quarters), and that there by he declared his universal

supremacy. His first sermon is significantly called the discourse of "turning the wheel of the law" (*dharmachakra-pravartana sutta*)s meaning that it was the inauguration of his kingdom. Of course his kingdom is a spiritual one the fundamental rule of which is justice (*dharma*), and hence it is called *dharmachakra*, the realm of justice. Hence the term *dharma*, in this context should be more appropriately rendered as justice or righteousness rather than law. Introducing the above-mentioned discourse Professor Rhya Davids, (in *Buddhist Suttas*, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XI) says, "The name given to it by the early Buddhists—the setting in motion onwards of the royal chariot-wheel of the supreme dominion of the Dhamma—means... not 'the turning of the Wheel of the Law', as it has been usually rendered, but the inauguration or foundation, of the kingdom of Righteousness."

Another context in which the wheel is symbolically employed is the *bhava-chakra*, the wheel of becoming. In general, it is the symbol of the cycle of birth and death, depicting the various possibilities, experiences and stages of an individual's life in the *samsāra*. Thus on the *bhava-chakra* there are the representations of the realms of hells, animals, ghosts, gods and human beings; of lust, hatred and delusion, respectively, in the form of a dove, snake and a pig; and of the twelve links *nidānas* of empirical existence. And the entire wheel is shown as being swallowed by the demon of impermanence (*anityatā*). Then, outside the wheel there stands the image of the Buddha pointing the way to *nirvāna*, and written on the wheel is an urgent call to strive for liberation from the *samsāra*.<sup>6</sup>

Closely related to the symbol of wheel is the prayerwheel, very commonly used by the Tibetan Buddhists. Strictly speaking, it is not a wheel, but a cylinder (or a barrel or a drum) made to turn freely on its axis by hand, wind, steam or water; and as such it is a machine or an instrument rather than a symbol. The Tibetans believe that by repeating the scriptural texts, prayers, mantras, or any act of worship one can increase the quantum of spiritual merit. So the use of beads to keep count of prayers, mantras etc., is very common among them. Along with it, they wanted a device to say the prayer, *mantra* etc a certain number of times in the shortest period of time, and the

6. Cf. E. J. Thomas *The History of Buddhist Thought*. (London: Routledge and Kogan Paul, 1971), pp. 68-69.

prayer-wheel (or sometimes called praise-wheel) served as such a device of using which the saying of the prayer, *mantra* etc., is literally mechanized, so to say. Its cylinder contains inscriptions of prayers *mantras*, and Scriptural texts, or images of the Buddha. Anybody turning it once is believed to secure the merit of having said all those prayers, *mantras* etc, or having worshipped those images. Thus a man turning once the wheel containing a thousand inscriptions of a particular prayer gains the merit of having said it a thousand times. The prayer-wheel is made in different sizes and styles. There are small portable hand-wheels, which one may carry and turn while going for an evening walk, as indeed many do in Tibetan societies. There are also very huge prayer-wheels installed in public places for the convenient use of anybody passing by. Sometimes a series of wheels are seen touching each other so that one can turn them all together by a sweeping touch over them. Prayer-wheels are found also attached to water-falls and chimneys, or suspend in the air, so that they keep on turning by means of water or wind, thus bringing a continuous supply of merit to their makers or owners even without their knowing it.

The most common *mantra* inscribed on the wheel is: *Om mani padme hung*, which literally means, "Praise to the Jewel in the Lotus, Amen!" The Jewel (*mani*) in the Lotus (*padme*) is obviously the Buddha. William Simpson says:

The first word in this sentence is the *Aum* or *Om*, which is so sacred among the Hindus that some will only repeat it without sound, and others only think of it. In the present case it may be understood in the sense of "Adoration" or "Reverence." *Mani* means a "Jewel" or "Gem"; *Padme* is "in the Lotus"; and *hung* is usually rendered by "Amen". The whole sentence would thus be, "Adoration to the Jewel in the Lotus, Amen!" The words are meant to be an expression of the highest devotion or reverence; nothing is asked or prayed for, and instead of calling these cylinders by the usual accepted name, they should, on the contrary, be called "Praising-Machines."<sup>7</sup>

The above discussed *mantra* takes us to the next conventional symbol in Buddhism, namely, the lotus. In all Indian traditions,

7. W. Simpson, *The Buddhist Praying Wheel*: (New Delhi: Oriental publishers and distributors 1978), pp. 28-29.

and especially in Buddhism, the lotus is a popular symbol of divinity and transcendence. The Buddha images, sitting as well as standing, almost invariably have the lotus to serve as the seat or the pedestal. Thus, he is always depicted as “a Jewel in the Lotus”, so to say. In the Indian sculptures,

The Buddha is represented sitting on the *Padmāsana*, or Lotus-Throne. The petals of the lotus are carved all round the edge of the seat on which the figure sits. It is rare to find a statue of the Buddha, either sitting or standing, without the lotus being indicated. In some of the smaller rude figures in marble, the petals are often indicated by only a few ogee lines. In large and highly-finished figures, again, the petals are made so ornamental, that their real character might be difficult to realize. This conventional form of the Buddha sitting or standing on this symbolical flower is exactly according to the “Jewel in the Lotus” of the Mantra.<sup>8</sup>

We have already referred to the myth according to which lotuses miraculously sprang up and supported the first steps of the infant Buddha. A Mahayana Buddhist Scripture is named *The Lotus of True Law (Saddharma-pundarika)*; and Boddhisattva Avalokitesvara, the central figure in Tibetan Buddhism is distinguished by a lotus in the hand, and is, therefore, called *Padma-pāni* (Lotus-handed). Some other Boddhisattvas, too, are represented with a lotus in the hand.

The symbolism of the lotus as indicating divinity and transcendence comes from the fact that although the lotus-plant is rooted in mud under water, its flower securely holds itself so high that neither the mud nor the water can stain it. Thus, it eloquently speaks about the other-worldliness of a sage or god.

Lotus and water are often symbols of creation in Indian mythologies. Thus, the Lord Brahmā in the act of creation is represented as seated in a lotus, whose stalk issues from the navel of the Lord Vishnu, who reclines on the coils of the mythological snake—symbolically called *ananta*, which means eternity—floating in the ocean. In the context of creation the lotus has a sexual symbolism, and

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8. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

stands for the feminine principle of creativity. Then the Buddha invoked as "the Jewel in the Lotus" may be considered the counterpart of the Hindu imagery of the creator Brahma in the lotus. William Simpson observes:<sup>9</sup>

The Brahmanical system, it may be explained, by one process reduces all the powers of nature to two—these are male and female. The Padma, or Lotus, it is well-known, represents the female *Sakti*, or power. The jewel, or gem, when joined to it, would represent the male power; and the combination becomes identical with the symbols under which Maha Deo, or Siva, is worshipped.

This suggestion seems to be warranted, when we take into account the tantric tradition of Buddhism in Tibet with its fondness for erotic symbols and rituals, and the frequent representation of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara in embrace with his consort goddess Tara.

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 38.