



The Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism

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Abstract:

The Eight Auspicious Symbols (Ashtamangala) are a group of lucky Buddhist symbols that appear on many Buddhist textiles, objects and paintings. Each symbol represents an aspect of Buddhist teaching and when they appear together, their powers are multiplied. The symbols derive from Indian iconography and have become especially popular in Tibetan Buddhism. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist art frequently makes use of a particular set of "Eight Auspicious" symbols, (Ashtamangala) in household and public art. These symbols have spread with Buddhism to many cultures arts, including Indian, Tibetan, Nepalese, and Chinese art. Chhatra or The Parasol which symbolizes spiritual power. According to Hindu mythology, it is the emblem of Varuna, also considered an embodiment of kingship. Chhatra is also a deity, yidam and ishta-devata. In various Dharmic Traditions it is an accoutrement of chakravartin. A number of deities are depicted with Chhatra, and they include Revanta, Surya, and Vishnu (in his Vamana avatar). In Dharmic Tradition iconography, Traditional Tibetan medicine thangkas and Ayurvedic diagrams, the chhatra is uniformly represented as the Sahasrara. The two fish were originally symbolic of the rivers Ganges and Yamuna, but came to represent good fortune in general, for Hindus, Jain and Buddhists. Within Buddhism it also symbolises that living beings who practice the dharma need have no fear to drown in the ocean of suffering, and can freely migrate (chose their rebirth) like fish in the water. It Symbolises resurrection of eternal life, rebirth etc. The pair signifies the ability to swim with ease without obstruction in the ocean of this world.

Red Lotus (Kamala): *This signifies the original nature and purity of the heart. It is the lotus of love, compassion, passion and all other qualities of the heart. It is the flower of Avalokiteshvara.*

The lotus is rooted in deep mud and its stem grows through murky water. But the blossom rises above the muck and opens in the sun, beautiful and fragrant. The flowers may be in full bloom and reveal their heart, or in a bud. The Dharmacakra is one of the eight auspicious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. The dharma wheel can refer to the dissemination of the dharma teaching from



country to country. In this sense the dharma wheel began rolling in India, carried on to Central Asia, and then arrived in South East Asia and East Asia.

The Eight Auspicious Symbols (Ashtamangala) are a group of lucky Buddhist symbols that appear on many Buddhist textiles, objects and paintings. Each symbol represents an aspect of Buddhist teaching and when they appear together, their powers are multiplied. The symbols derive from Indian iconography and have become especially popular in Tibetan Buddhism.

Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist art frequently makes use of a particular set of “Eight Auspicious” symbols, (Ashtamangala) in household and public art. These symbols have spread with Buddhism to many cultures arts, including Indian, Tibetan, Nepalese, and Chinese art. Chhatra or The Parasol which symbolizes spiritual power. Kalasha or The Treasure Vase which depicts spiritual and material abundance. Padma or The Lotus denotes pure mental and physical spirituality. Shrivasta or The Endless Knot symbolizes the eternal wisdom of Buddha. Suvarnamatsya or The Golden Fishes denotes salvation, good fortune and wealth. Sankha or The Conch Shell is one of the most famous symbols of Buddhism and is depicted in many teachings of Buddha. Dhvaia or The Victory Banner shows the success of the teachings of Buddha. It also denotes wisdom over ignorance.

Chhatraratna (The Parasol)

The 'Precious Parasol'ⁱ or chhatraratna is an auspicious symbol in the Dharmic traditions. The Parasol of authority symbolises the authority of Buddha. The Parasol protects the head from the scorching heat of Sun just as the law protects the mind from the scorching passion. The precious umbrella symbolises the wholesome activity of preserving beings from illness, harmful forces, obstacles and so forth in this life and all kinds of temporary and enduring sufferings of the three lower realms, and the realms of men and gods in future lives. It also represents the enjoyment of a feast of benefit under its cool shade. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the umbrella or parasol is included in the 'Eight Auspicious Signs' or Ashtamangala.



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Suvrnyamatsya (The Golden Fish)

The two fish were originally symbolic of the rivers Ganges and Yamuna, but came to represent good fortune in general, for Hindus, Jain and Buddhists. Within Buddhism it also symbolises that living beings who practice the dharma need have no fear to drown in the ocean of suffering, and can freely migrate (chose their rebirth) like fish in the water. It Symbolises resurrection of eternal life, rebirth etc. The pair signifies the ability to swim with ease without obstruction in the ocean of this world. They may also be taken to symbolise the eye of perception as fish can see through muddy water. Thus, The golden fish symbolises the auspiciousness of all living beings in a state of fearlessness, without danger of drowning in the ocean of sufferings, and migrating from place to place freely and spontaneously, just as fish swim freely without fear through water.

The Bhumpa (The Vase)

The Vase represents a repository of limitless material wealth, good health and long life. The treasure vase is filled with precious and sacred things, yet no matter how much is taken out, it is always full. It symbolizes long life and prosperity. The bumpa or phumpa, is a ritual vase with a spout used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals and empowerments. It is understood to be, in some contexts, the vessel or the expanse of the Universe. There are two kinds of bumpa: main vase, and the activity vase. The main vase is usually placed in the center of the mandala, while the activity vase is placed on the Lama's table and is used by the Chopon, or ritual specialist, during rituals and empowerments.ⁱⁱⁱ

Padma (The Lotus)

The lotus (Padma) is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols and one of the most poignant representations of Buddhist teaching. The roots of a lotus are in the mud, the stem grows up through the water, and the heavily scented flower lies pristinely 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. "the spirit of the best





of men is spotless, like the lotus in the muddy water which does not adhere to it." The color of the lotus has an important bearing on the symbology associated with it:

- White Lotus (Pundarika): 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.
- Pink Lotus (Padma): This the supreme lotus, generally reserved for the highest deity. Thus naturally it is associated with the Great Buddha himself.
- Red Lotus (Kamala): This signifies the original nature and purity of the heart. It is the lotus of love, compassion, passion and all other qualities of the heart. It is the flower of Avalokiteshvara.
- Blue Lotus (Utpala): 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.

Thus, the lotus is one of Buddhism's best recognized motifs and appears in all kinds of Buddhist art across all Buddhist cultures. The first appearance of the lotus in Buddhist art to the columns built by Asoka in the 3rd Century BCE. However, the lotus is found frequently in the early Buddhist texts.^{iv} Every important Buddhist deity is associated in some manner with the lotus, either being seated upon a lotus in full bloom or holding one in their hands. In some images of standing Buddhas, each foot rests on a separate lotus.

Padma (*Nelumbo nucifera*), the sacred lotus, is an aquatic plant that plays a central role in Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The lotus flower symbolises the complete purification of the defilements of the body, speech and mind, and the full blossoming of wholesome deeds in blissful liberation. Lotuses are symbols of purity and 'spontaneous' generation and hence symbolize divine birth. According to the Lalitavistara, 'the spirit of the best of men is spotless, like the new lotus in the [muddy] water which does not adhere to it', and, according to esoteric Buddhism, the heart of the beings is like an unopened lotus: when the virtues of the Buddha develop therein the lotus blossoms. This is why the Buddha sits on a lotus in bloom. In Tantrism, it is the symbol of the feminine principle. The lotuses are usually differentiated by their colour and grouping, in three or five flowers, which may or may not be combined with leaves.



The lotus is rooted in deep mud and its stem grows through murky water. But the blossom rises above the muck and opens in the sun, beautiful and fragrant. In Buddhism, the lotus represents the true nature of beings, who rise through samsara into the beauty and clarity of enlightenment.

The flowers may be in full bloom and reveal their heart, or in a bud. The eight petals represent the Noble Eightfold Path and the eight principal acolyte deities of the central deity on the mandalas. The flowers may also be depicted presented in a cup or on a tray, as a symbol of homage.

The lotus is an ancient polyvalent symbol in Asian culture. Hindus revere it with the gods Vishnu, Brahma and to a lesser degree Kubera, and the goddesses Lakshmi and Sarasvati. Often used as an example of divine beauty and purity. Vishnu is often described as the 'Lotus-Eyed One'. The lotus blooms uncovering the creator god Brahma in padmasana. In Chinese culture: "I love the lotus because while growing from mud, it is unstained".^v

Thus, In Buddhist symbolism the lotus is symbolic of purity of the body, speech, and mind as while rooted in the mud, its flowers blossom on long stalks as if floating above the muddy waters of attachment and desire. It is also symbolic of detachment as drops of water easily slide off its petals. 'The lotus in both Egypt and India symbolizes the union of the four elements; earth, air, fire, and water. The lotus is therefore the perfection of the fourfold order of the natural world..... It may also be interpreted, as in Egypt, as the exaltation of the essence quality of the lotus.^{vi} 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 blossom; that is why the Buddha sits on a lotus bloom'.^{vii}

Dhungkar ([The Conch Shell](#))

The white conch which coils to the right symbolises the deep, far-reaching and melodious sound of the Dharma teachings, which being appropriate to different natures, predispositions and aspirations of disciples, awakens them from the deep slumber of ignorance and urges them to accomplish their own and others' welfare. It symbolises reverberating sound of Dharma and signifies the awakening of sentient beings from the sleeping state of their ignorance. It persuades them towards the path of noble deeds that are beneficial to others. Gautam blew the conch shell when he decided to preach the law. The Conch shell is blown in commemoration of this event whenever there is a special sermon by a high lama. Dung-Dkar



translated from Tibetan is literally “White Conch.”^{viii} It is heavily decorated with ornate patterns with inlaid metals such as bronze and tin and is topped with a bright bead, which is to represent good energy.

In Asia, the conch has long been used as a battle horn. In the Hindu epic The Mahabharata, the sound of the hero Arjuna's conch terrorized his enemies. In ancient times a white conch also represented the Brahmin caste to Hindus. In Buddhism, a white conch that coils to the right represents the sound of the Dharma reaching far and wide, awakening beings from ignorance.

A conch is one of the Ashtamangala. Each mythological hero in ancient Indian epics is described as having a great White Conch shell, which usually has a name. It is this ancient belief that is thought to have influenced the image of the White Conch in Tibetan music in that the white conch is a sacred symbol of peace and good energy.

The dung-dkar has been used as a religious instrument throughout the recorded history of religious music in Tibet. Nowadays the dung-dkar is mainly found only in Buddhist monasteries and performances, very rarely used as a secular instrument. The sound of the Dung-Dkar is a “symbol of the proclamation to the world of Buddhist law” and is played in pairs in orchestras or to summon the public to certain ceremonies.

Shrivatsa (The Endless knot)

The endless knot (shrivatsa) is a closed, graphic ornament composed of right-angled, intertwined lines. It overlaps without a beginning or an end, symbolising the Buddha's endless wisdom and compassion. It indicates continuity as the underlying reality of existence. It is conjectured that it may have evolved from an ancient naga symbol with two stylized snakes. It signifies cause and effect and the union of compassion and wisdom. It is law without beginning and without end which symbolises Eternity. The curly hair symbolises Brahamajala representing all the theories and philosophies of the universe.



The auspicious drawing symbolises the mutual dependence of religious doctrine and secular affairs. Similarly, it represents the union of wisdom and method, the inseparability of emptiness and



dependent arising at the time of path, and finally, at the time of enlightenment, the complete union of wisdom and great compassion.

The endless knot has been described as "an ancient symbol representing the interweaving of the Spiritual [path](#), the flowing of Time and Movement within that which is Eternal. All existence, it says, is bound by time and change, yet ultimately rests serenely within the Divine and the Eternal." The Endless knot iconography symbolised [Samsara](#) i.e., the endless cycle of suffering or birth, death and rebirth within Tibetan Buddhism. Interplay and interaction of the opposing forces in the dualistic world of manifestation, leading to their union, and ultimately to harmony in the universe. The mutual dependence of religious doctrine and secular affairs. The union of wisdom and method. Since the knot has no beginning or end it also symbolizes the infinite wisdom of the Buddha. The auspicious drawing symbolises the mutual dependence of religious doctrine and secular affairs. Similarly, it represents the union of wisdom and method, the inseparability of emptiness and dependent arising at the time of path, and finally, at the time of enlightenment, the complete union of wisdom and great compassion. It is an important cultural marker in places significantly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism such as Tibet, Mongolia, Tuva, Kalmykia, and Buryatia. It is also sometimes found in Chinese art and used in Chinese knots.

Dhvaja (The Banner of Victory)

Dhvaja (Victory banner) meaning banner or flag. The victory banner signifies the Buddha's victory over the demon [Mara](#) and over what Mara represents - passion, fear of death, pride and lust. The Dhvaja is comprised amongst the Ashtamangala, the 'eight auspicious symbols'. The victory banner symbolises the victory of the activities of one's own and others body, speech and mind over obstacles and negativities. It also stands for the complete victory of the Buddhist Doctrine over all harmful and pernicious forces. This symbol signifies the fortune of having victory of good over the evil forces which hinders the success of noble goals and also proclaims the victory of peity over evil. It is used in processions.



Vedic (Rigveda) sacrifices originated with a cosmic 'self-sacrifice' ([atma-yajna](#)) of Purusha for the creation, maintenance and redemption of the entire Universe. Purusha was called Yupa Dhvaja because the instrument of his cosmic sacrifice was a sacred cross or post ('Axis Mundi Yupa



Stake' - simply Yupa), to which Purusha was fixed in the primal 'Purusha Sukta Hymn'. Thus the developed Vedic sacrificial system, sacrificial victims were fixed to Yupa, in memory of Purusha's cosmic sacrifice. Dhvaja in the Brahmanic cults, takes on the appearance of a high column (dhvaja-stambha) erected in front of temples.

Dhvaja banner was a military standard of ancient Indian warfare. In the epic book Ramayana the messenger, warrior and servant of Rama was Hanuman who had extraordinary skill in warfare and terror of Rakshasas. In a conflict with Ravana he accidentally set the island fortress Lanka on fire. In order to cool himself down, Hanuman jumped into the sea. A drop of his perspiration fell into the mouth of a great fish which gave birth to a mighty hero named Makardhwaja. Makara Dhvaja is considered the son of Hanuman.

Makara Dhvaja has become latter an emblem of the Vedic god of love and desire - [Kamadeva](#). As the 'tempter' (mara), Kamadeva was the Hindu counterpart of the Mara, the 'evil one', who attempted to obstruct the Buddha from attaining enlightenment. In early Buddhism the concept of Mara as a demonic obstructor to spiritual progress was presented as group of four 'maras' or 'evil influences'. As a symbol of the Buddha's victory over the four maras, the early Buddhists adopted Kamadeva's emblem of Makara Dhvaja, and four of those banners were erected in the cardinal directions surrounding the enlightenment stupa of the Tathagata or Buddha.

Within the Tibetan tradition a list of eleven different forms of the victory banner is given to represent eleven specific methods for overcoming 'defilements'. Many variations of the dhvaja's design can be seen on the roofs of Tibetan 'monasteries' (Gompa, Vihara) to symbolize the Buddha's victory over four maras. In its most traditional form the victory banner is fashioned as a cylindrical ensign mounted upon long wooden axel-pole. The top of the banner takes the form of a small white 'parasol' which is surrounded by a central 'wish granting gem'. This domed parasol is rimmed by an ornate golden crest-bar or moon-crest with makara-trailed ends, from which hangs a billowing yellow or 'white silk scarf'.^{ix}

Dharmacakra (The wheel)

The wheel (chakra) is one of the most important and common Buddhist symbols, as it represent the teachings of the Buddha. In those days, the Dharmachakra symbolized not only





the Buddha's teachings but the Buddha himself. On the tops of the pillars built by Emperor Ashoka (272-32 BC), four carved lions and four wheels face the four directions to proclaim the Buddhist Dharma throughout India. The Buddha was the one who 'turned the wheel of the dharma' and thus the wheel symbol is the 'Dharmachakra', or 'wheel of law.' The Tibetan term for this symbol means "the wheel of transformation."

The Dharma Wheel, also called the dharma-chakra or Dhamma chakka, is one of the most well-known symbols of Buddhism. The wheel symbolise the Wheel of Buddhist Law, the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. The early Dharma Wheels followed the India tradition having many spokes as shown by this Dvaravati style from the 7th - 9th century. According to tradition, the Dharma Wheel was first turned when the Buddha delivered his first sermon after his enlightenment. Modern versions of Dharma Wheels often have four spokes, symbolizing the Four Jinas or the four 'moments' in the life of the Buddha; or with eight spokes, or octagonal, symbolizing the Noble Eightfold Path. The spokes sometimes extend beyond the circle, in points. These wheels, represented in Indian art even before the period of King Asoka (272-232 B.C.E.), were generally placed on four lions, back to back, and facing the four cardinal points.

"The wheel (Dharmachakra), as already mentioned, was adopted by Buddha's disciples as the symbol of his doctrine, and combined with other symbols - a trident placed above it, etc. - stands for him on the sculptures of the Asoka period.^x It is one of the Ashtamangala Symbols.

The Dharmacakra symbol is represented as a chariot wheel with eight or more spokes. It is one of the oldest known Buddhist symbols found in Indian art, appearing with the first surviving post-Harappan Indian iconography in the time of the Buddhist king Asoka. The Dharmacakra has been used by all Buddhist nations as a symbol ever since. In its simplest form, the Dharmacakra is recognized globally as a symbol for Buddhism. The golden wheel symbolises the auspiciousness of the turning of the precious wheel of Buddha's doctrine, both in its teachings and realizations, in all realms and at all times, enabling beings to experience the joy of wholesome deeds and liberation.

According to the Pali Canon, Vinayapitaka, Khandhaka, Mahavagga, — number of spokes of the Dharmacakra represent various meanings: 8 spokes representing the Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya magga). 12 spokes representing the Twelve Laws of Dependent Origination ([Patīccasamuppāda](#)). 24 spokes representing the Twelve Laws of Dependent Origination and the Twelve Laws of Dependent



Termination (Paticcasamuppada). 31 spokes representing 31 realms of existence (11 realms of desire, 16 realms of form and 4 realms of formlessness). The hub stands for discipline, which is the essential core of meditation practice. The rim, which holds the spokes, refers to mindfulness or samadhi which holds everything together. The corresponding mudra, or symbolic hand gesture, is known as the Dharmacakra Mudra.

Today, the Dharmachakra appears in the art of every Buddhist culture. On images of the Buddha, the wheel appears on the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet, where it is one of the 32 Marks of a Great Man. It is especially prominent in Tibet, where it is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols and often flanked by two deer — the whole image representing the Buddha's first sermon in the Deer Park. The wheel is usually central to mandalas, geometric representations of the Buddhist universe. It also appears in the Dharmachakra Mudra, in which the Buddha forms a wheel with the position of his hands.

The Dharmacakra is one of the eight auspicious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. The dharma wheel can refer to the dissemination of the dharma teaching from country to country. In this sense the dharma wheel began rolling in India, carried on to Central Asia, and then arrived in South East Asia and East Asia. "Ambedkar, as a member of Nehru's first cabinet, proposed the use of the Buddhist Dharmachakra or "wheel of the law" on the new flag of India and the Ashokan lion-capital on the national currency.^{xi}

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