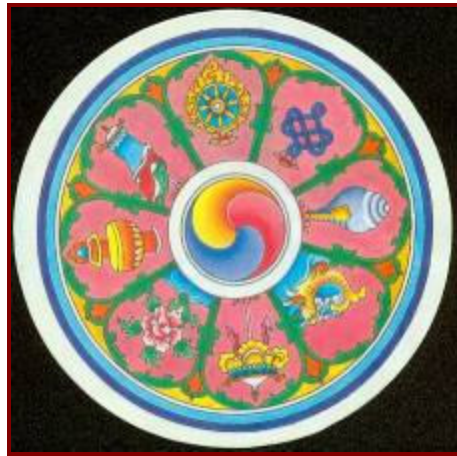


THE EIGHT AUSPICIOUS SYMBOLS

བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྟུགས་བརྒྱད།

(Tibetan: tashee-tag-gyay)



The set of Eight Auspicious Symbols is most popular in Buddhist Tibet. In Sanskrit they are known as *Ashtamangala*, *ashta* meaning "eight" and *mangala* "auspicious." In Tibetan, *tashee* means "auspicious," *tag* means "sign or symbol," and *gyay* means "eight."

The Eight Auspicious Symbols are as follows:

1. Right-Coiled White Conch
2. Precious Parasol
3. Victory Banner
4. Golden Fishes
5. Dharma Wheel
6. Endless Knot
7. Lotus Flower
8. Treasure Vase

From Robert Beer's book *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* [available from the TLI Bookstore] we read that

[i]n Buddhism these eight symbols of good fortune represent the offerings made by the gods to Shakyamuni Buddha immediately after he attained enlightenment. Brahma, the great god of the form realm, was the first to appear with an offering of a thousand-spoked golden wheel, requesting Shakyamuni to turn the teaching wheel of the dharma. The great sky god Indra appeared next, presenting a white,

right-spiralling conch shell as a symbol of the proclamation of the dharma. The earth goddess Sthavara (Tib. Sayi Lhamo), who had borne witness to the Buddha's enlightenment, presented Shakyamuni with a golden vase full of the nectar of immortality. Iconographically Brahma and Indra are frequently represented to the left and right of Buddha's enlightenment throne, offering the golden wheel and the white conch shell. (171)

Designs of the Eight Auspicious Symbols decorate all manner of sacred and secular Tibetan Buddhist objects. One finds them embellishing wooden furniture, metalwork, carpets, silk brocades, jewelry, paper, and as wall hangings in temples.

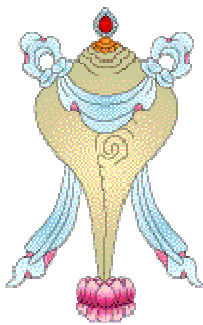
For further reading (all titles are available from the TLI Bookstore):

- *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* by Robert Beer
- *Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols* by Robert Beer
- *Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism* by Claude Levenson

The Eight Auspicious Symbols: A Brief Explanation of Each

Right-Coiled White Conch

(Tibetan: དུང་ཀཱར་ཡལ་ཀེལ། doong-kahr-yay-kyeel)



The right-turning white conch shell represents the beautiful sound of the spread of the Buddhadharma. Its sound is deep, far-reaching and melodious, and hearing it awakens beings from the deep slumber of ignorance, urging them to accomplish their own and others' welfare.

Shells which spiral to the right in a clockwise direction are a rarity and are considered especially sacred. The right-spiraling 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

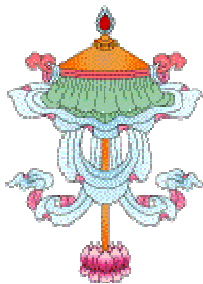
the right, as do his fine body hairs, the long curl between his eyebrows (*urna*), and also the conch-like swirl of his navel.



Today the conch is used in Tibetan Buddhism to call together religious assemblies. During the actual practice of rituals, it is used both as a musical instrument and as a container for holy water.

Precious Parasol

(Tibetan: རིན་ཆེན་གདུགས། rin-chen-duke)



The parasol 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 Asian 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 Precious Parasol embodies notions of wealth or royalty, for one had to be rich enough to possess such an item, and further, to have someone carry it. It points to the "royal ease" and power experienced in the Buddhist life of detachment.

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

The Precious Parasol symbolizes the beneficial activities of keeping beings from the harms of illness, harmful forces, obstacles and so forth. It also represents the enjoyment of a feast of benefit under its cool shade.



Procession at Ewam's 2005 Festival of Peace in Arlee, MT. The parasol is shading a photo of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

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 His Holiness the Dalai Lama are entitled to both, and in processions, first a peacock parasol and then a silk one is carried after him.

Victory Banner

(Tibetan: རྒྱལ་མཚན། gyel-tsen)



The Victory Banner represents the victory of the Buddha's teachings over death, ignorance, disharmony and all the negativities of this world. It also symbolizes the victory of Buddhist doctrine over all harmful and pernicious forces.

The roofs of Tibetan monasteries are often decorated with victory banners of different shapes and sizes.

Golden Fishes

(Tibetan: གསེར་ཉ། sair-nyah)

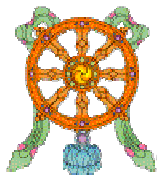


The sea in Tibetan Buddhism is associated with the world of suffering, the cycle of samsara. The Golden Fishes have been said to signify fearlessness and happiness as they swim freely through the oceans without drowning, freely and spontaneously, just as fish swim freely without fear through the water. The fishes symbolize happiness, for they have complete freedom in the water.

The pair of fishes originated as an ancient pre-Buddhist symbol of the two main sacred rivers in India, the Ganges and the Yamuna. They are traditionally drawn in the form of carp, which are commonly regarded in Asia as elegant due to their size, shape and longevity.

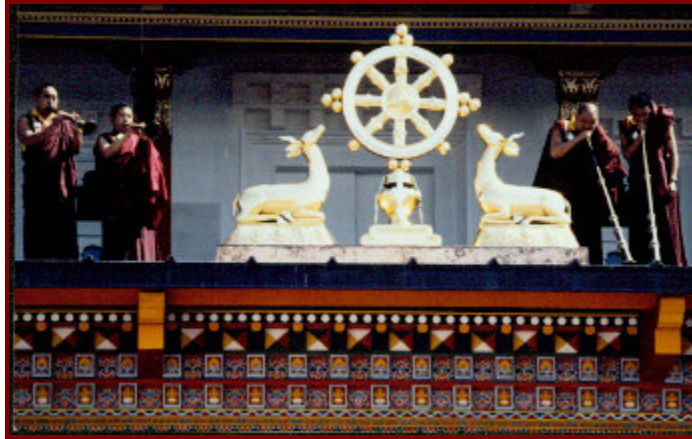
Dharma Wheel

(Tibetan: འཁོར་ལོ། kore-low)



The Golden Wheel or Dharma Wheel symbolizes 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.

It is, with the lotus, one of the earliest and most common symbols of Buddhism. Traditionally represented with eight spokes, it can have a variety of meanings. It initially only meant royalty (concept of the "Monarch of the Wheel", or Chakravartin), but started to be used in a Buddhist context on the Pillars of Ashoka during the 3rd century BCE. The Dharma wheel is generally seen as referring to the historical process of teaching the Buddhadharma; the eight spokes refer to the Noble Eightfold Path, one of the Buddha's first teachings.



Golden Deer and Dharma Wheel statues found on the temple of Dakshang Kagyu Ling in France



Footprint of the Buddha. 1st century, Gandhara, with depictions of the Three Jewels and the Dharma Wheel

Deer are a direct reference to the Buddha's first teaching in the Deer Park, Sarnath, also called Dharmachakra Parivartan. The suggestion is that so wondrous was the Buddha's appearance and peaceful his presence that even the animals came to listen. In the Tibetan tradition, a monastery which holds the two text collections of the *Kangyur* (direct teachings of the Buddha) and *Tengyur* (commentaries) would have this symbol of deer on both sides of the Dharma-wheel on the roof.

Endless Knot

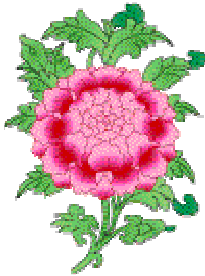
(Tibetan: དཔལ་བེའུ། pell-bay-oo)



The Auspicious or Endless Knot is a geometric diagram which symbolizes the nature of reality where everything is interrelated and only exists as part of a web of karma and its effect. Having no beginning or end, it also represents the infinite wisdom of the Buddha, and the union of compassion and wisdom. Also, it represents the illusory character of time, and long life as it is endless.

Lotus Flower

(Tibetan: པ་མ། pay-mah)



The lotus flower symbolizes the complete purification of the defilements of the body, speech and mind, and the full blossoming of wholesome deeds in blissful liberation. From the website Exotic India Art we read the following:

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.

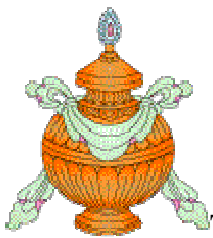
Thus says the *Lalitavistara*, "the spirit of the best of men is spotless, like the lotus in the muddy water which does not adhere to it." According to another scholar, "in esoteric Buddhism, the heart of the beings is like an unopened lotus: when the virtues of the Buddha develop therein, the lotus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



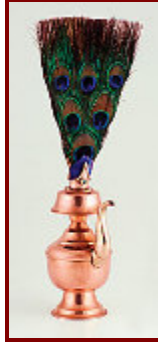
A lotus adorns the roof of Dakshang Kagyu Ling in Burgundy, France

Treasure Vase

(Tibetan: བླ་པ་པ། boom-pah)



The Treasure Vase symbolizes an endless rain of long life, wealth and prosperity and all the benefits of this world and liberation. Also known as the "vase of inexhaustible treasures, it is a sign of the inexhaustible riches available in the Buddhist teachings.



A Boompa which would be used for purifying shrine offerings

Aside from iconography of the Eight Auspicious Symbols, Treasure Vases filled with saffron water are found near the shrine offerings in a Tibetan Buddhist temple, the water of which is used to purify offerings. There is also a practice performed at monasteries and dharma centers which involves burying or storing treasure vases at certain locations to generate wealth and harmony.

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