



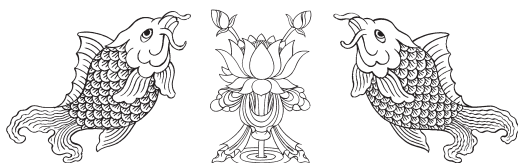
THE HANDBOOK of
TIBETAN BUDDHIST SYMBOLS

ROBERT BEER

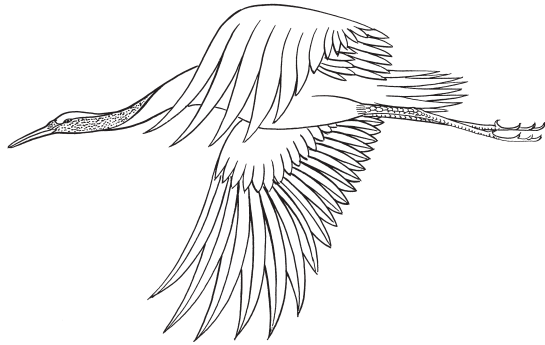


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The Handbook of
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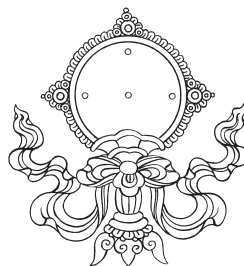


*The
Handbook
of*



TIBETAN BUDDHIST SYMBOLS

Written and Illustrated by
ROBERT BEER



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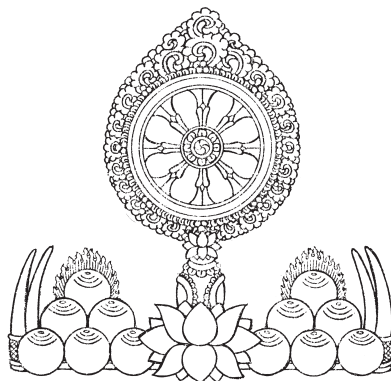
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True democracy occurs when soul meets soul on the open road. There are so many fine people whom I have met upon this 'road of the alone' that have touched me deeply. They know well who they are, even though they are not all mentioned by name.



INTRODUCTION



In the summer of 1999 I completed the text of *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala. & London: Serindia). This book took a long time in its making. The brush drawings alone took almost eight years to complete, and were created in a prolonged period of semi-retreat in the remote Western Highlands of Scotland. By comparison the writing of the text was relatively quick and painless. When there is much to say words are easy to come by, and perhaps my greatest difficulty was in knowing when to stop. After writing nearly a quarter of a million words my publisher and editor 'brought the chopper down'. The book was way past its deadline, and there wasn't even time left to create an index. But I felt it was a good and original work, although I also felt it was virtually being presented in its first draft.

At the beginning of 2000 I wrote a concise pictorial index for *Deities of Tibetan Buddhism* (Willson, M. and Brauen, M. 2000. Boston: Wisdom). Martin Willson spent around fourteen years translating and annotating the Tibetan texts for this work, which covers the abridged descriptions of just over five hundred deities. With the almost simultaneous publication of these two works I felt that some original insight had

been presented on the complex symbolism of Vajrayana art.

This *Handbook* is based on a synthesis from the original text of *The Encyclopedia*, and of the condensed version that appears in *Deities of Tibetan Buddhism*. Although only a limited selection of my original drawings appear in this book, and the scope of the subject matter has been reduced, I feel that this material is now presented in a more accessible and user-friendly format.

I have tried to structure the contents of this book into a logical progression, so that the many lists of numerical concepts, which are so characteristic of the Buddhist teachings, are gradually introduced into the text. The first five sections of this *Handbook* covers the main groups of auspicious symbols, offerings, and emblems, many of which appeared as the first symbolic motifs of early Indian Buddhism. The sixth section deals with the origins of the main natural and mythological animals that appear in Buddhist art. The seventh section deals with the cosmological symbols of the sun and moon, the five elements, Mount Meru, and the mandala offering. The eighth section introduces the main ritual Vajrayana implements of the *vajra* and bell, crossed-*vajra*, and ritual dagger, and the tantric *kapalika*

attributes of the *khatvanga*, *damaru*, thigh-bone trumpet, skull-cup, and curved knife. The ninth and tenth sections cover the array of traditional and magical weapons that are mainly wielded by the semi-wrathful *yidam* and wrathful protective deities, whilst the eleventh section deals with some of the more necromantic attributes of these deities. The twelfth and thirteenth sections encompass the spectrum of hand-held implements and plant attributes that are held by many diverse deities and human teachers. The fourteenth and fifteenth sections deal with some of the more esoteric symbols of Vajrayana Buddhism, including the ‘reality-source’ or *dharmodaya*, ‘sacrificial cake offerings’ or *tormas*, and the ‘inner offering’. The sixteenth section completes the text with a description of the main hand gestures or *mudras* made by the deities.

At the end of the book are four appendixes and a glossary. The first appendix relates the ancient Indian legend of the churning of the ocean. The second appendix gives a brief outline of the conceptual assembly of the Five Buddha Families. The third appendix gives a brief explanation of the various *kayas* or ‘divine bodies’ of the Buddhas. The fourth appendix attempts to briefly explain the complexities of the Buddhist ‘channel wheel’ systems of the Highest Yoga Tantras, which symbolically relate to the transmutation of the processes of birth, life, death, and rebirth into the state of supreme enlightenment. The subject matter of these last three appendixes is extremely profound. Although these subjects are only briefly and inadequately explained here, a deep understanding of them is vital for a true insight into the amazingly sophisticated principles and practices of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Throughout the text I have used the term ‘symbol’ to refer to the intrinsic meanings ascribed to a particular object or attribute. A

more accurate interpretation of this term should perhaps be ‘purity’, as these attributes essentially represent the enlightened qualities or ‘purities’ of the deities. These purities are evocatively expressed in the various ‘Praises to the Deities’, which were composed by many great Indian and Tibetan masters over the last fifteen hundred years. The poetic verses of these beautiful prayers often reveal the reverence, faith, love, and devotion that these masters perceived in the deities as their sources of refuge and inspiration.

Throughout the text I have also used the terms ‘often, usually, frequently, generally, and traditionally’ to refer to particular symbolic definitions or descriptions. The use of these terms does not stem from an uncertainty about a symbol’s meaning or depiction, but from the fact that these symbols often have iconographical variations according to different traditions or lineages. To explain these tangential variations is beyond the scope of this book, although I have sometimes partially attempted to do so in the more voluminous text of *The Encyclopedia*. In Vajrayana iconography the three levels of an outer, inner, and secret symbolism are sometimes given, particularly within the practices of the Highest Yoga Tantras. The depths of meaning concealed within these teachings are extremely profound and multifaceted. Like a wish-granting gem that refracts a myriad rays of rainbow light, the nature of this light is one, although its aspects of illumination appear to be many.

A similar spectrum of understanding can be applied to the classical English terms that are used to describe the various Buddhist listings of mundane and enlightened qualities. These terms, such as the Eightfold Noble Path, the six perfections, and the four immeasurables, are all ‘relative’ terms with no easily definable ‘absolutes’. Their meanings are essentially inspirational, and as

subjects of contemplation they continually deepen in significance to accord with the practitioner's emotional, mental, psychological, philosophical, and spiritual capacities. In the Buddhist scriptures each of these numerical lists may be further subdivided into various aspects or components. The six perfections, for example, are each divided into a further threefold structure. The 'absolute' meaning of these terms exists only within the enlightened mind, where they spontaneously manifest as the innate radiance of the Buddhas' infinite clarity, wisdom, compassion, and love.

The vast pantheon of Buddhist deities and their symbolic attributes are purely an encapsulation or visual expression of the entire path of the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana teachings. They can only really be understood through a deep comprehension of these teachings, and they can only be directly realized through the continuity of prolonged practice, performance, and perfection. To think that one can understand them through historical, psychological, or comparative interpretation is simply not adequate. Buddhism is a living tradition that extends back over two and a half thousand years, to which thousands of great scholars, philosophers, and practitioners have devoted their entire lives and being. These teachings are perfectly integrated as they are and need no alternative interpretation. They can be apprehended and understood by the human mind, and herein lies the immaculate beauty of this 'living tradition', wherein one ultimately realizes that the *dharma* exists nowhere except in one's own mind, and that what one has been looking for is in reality what is actually looking.

Buddhism evolved within its homeland of India for seventeen hundred years, until the invading Islamic armies finally destroyed its great monastic academies at the end of the

twelfth century. The tantric transmissions of Vajrayana Buddhism were 'revealed' between the eighth and twelfth centuries, and this period of four hundred years represents the final blossoming of Indian Buddhist culture. It was during this same period that the Buddhist teachings were being transmitted into Tibet through Kashmir and Nepal, and translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. Most of the symbols that appear in Tibetan art are of Indian Buddhist origin, and many of these symbols already existed in ancient India prior to the advent of Buddhism itself. Similarly all of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, major *yidam* and protective deities are of Indian Buddhist origin, and are adorned in the silk robes and jewel ornaments of Indian royalty, or the bone ornaments and animal skins of Indian tantric *yogins* and *yoginis*.

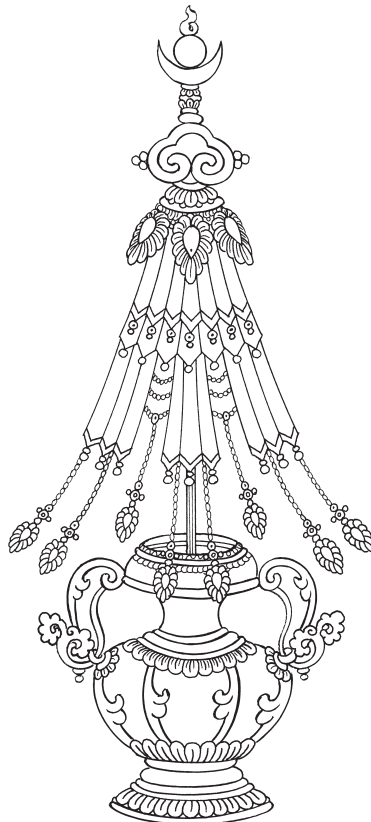
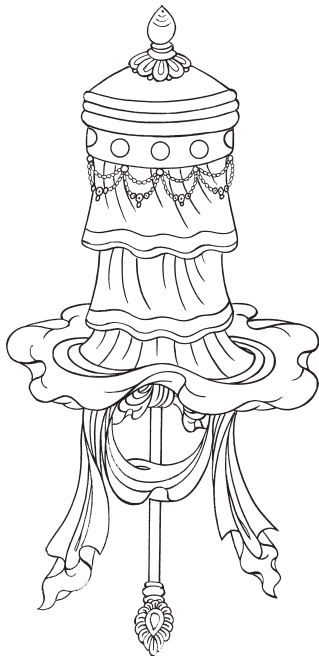
The indisputable Indian origin of most of these symbols inevitably poses the question: "What is it that distinguishes Tibetan Buddhism from early Indian Buddhism?" In his book *The Jewel in the Lotus* (London: Wisdom, 1987), Stephen Bachelor writes: "In their presentation of Buddhism the Tibetans did not diverge greatly from their Indian forerunners in terms of doctrinal content, but in the ways in which they organized this content into systematic stages leading to enlightenment. It is the logic of the Buddhist path which is Tibetan, not the individual doctrines or insights which are arranged in the light of this logic. What gives Tibetan Buddhism its own peculiar flavor, therefore, is not any uniquely Tibetan ingredient, but the way in which these common Buddhist ingredients have been blended together in the Tibetan mind."

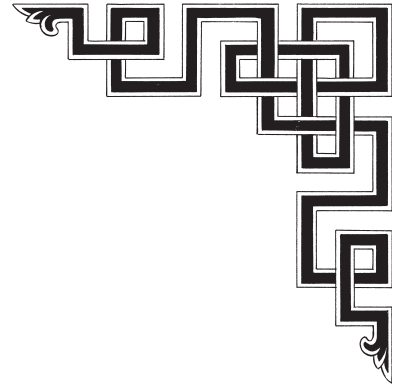
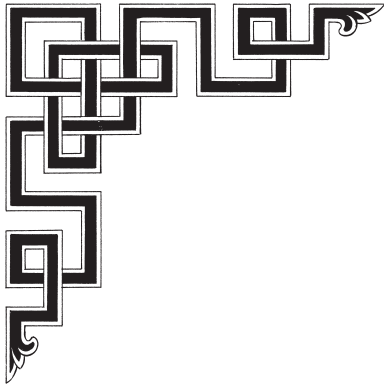
I have now been involved in the study and practice of Buddhist art for more than thirty years, yet never have I ceased to be amazed by all of the incredible wonders and insights that I have discovered within it.

Like a magic mirror it lights up with meaning the longer that you gaze into it, and I bow down in gratitude before the Enlightened Mind that conceived all of this divine beauty. There are some lines at the end of Sam Mendes' film *American Beauty* that seem to succinctly express this sentiment: "I guess I could be pretty pissed-off about what happened to me, but its hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much. My heart fills up

like a balloon that's about to burst, and then I remember to relax and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain, and then I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea of what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry, you will someday."

Robert Beer
Oxford, England
Easter Sunday 2003

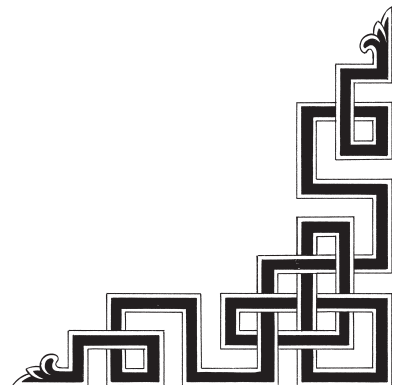
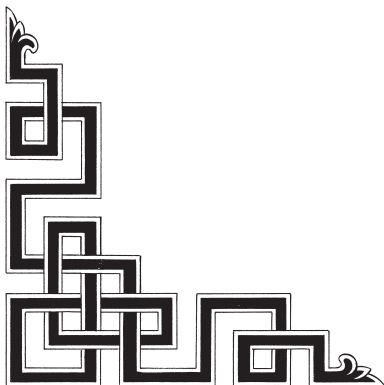




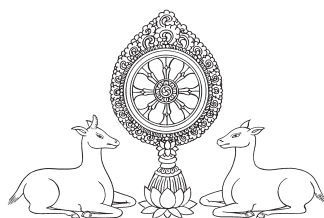
*After a million years of shining
The sun doesn't say to the earth –
'You owe me.'
Imagine a love like this.*

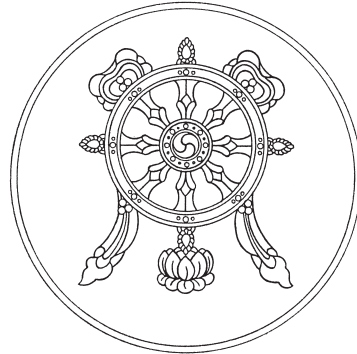
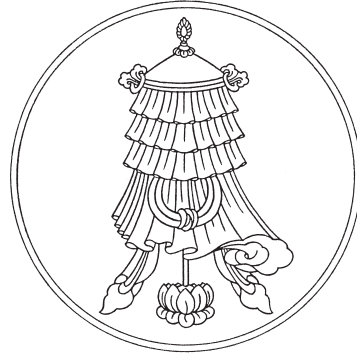
Hafiz

To the memory of John F.B. Miles, Jampa from Lhasa, Khamtrul Rinpoche, and Siddhimuni Shakya – four divine artists who shone like the sun and who will always continue to inspire me with their radiance. And to the memory of my dear friends Layla Norland and Geoffrey Blundell, who died during the compilation of this text, and to our cat 'Dread' who died upon the day of its completion.



The Handbook of
TIBETAN BUDDHIST SYMBOLS





THE EIGHT AUSPICIOUS SYMBOLS



The eight auspicious symbols (Skt. *astamangala*; Tib. *bkra-shis rtags-brgyad*) are the most well known group of Buddhist symbols, and are traditionally listed in the order of: (1) a white parasol; (2) a pair of golden fishes; (3) a treasure vase; (4) a lotus; (5) a right-spiraling white conch shell; (6) an endless knot or 'lucky diagram'; (7) a victorious banner; (8) a golden wheel.

Originally the eight auspicious symbols formed an early Indian assembly of offerings that were presented to a king at his investiture, and are almost certainly of pre-Buddhist origin. This early Indian group of eight auspicious objects probably comprised of: (1) a throne; (2) a swastika; (3) a handprint; (4) an entwined knot or hair-curl (Skt. *shrivatsa*); (5) a vase of jewels; (6) a water libation flask; (7) a pair of fishes; (8) a lidded bowl. An early south Indian group included: (1) a flywhisk; (2) a pair of fishes; (3) an elephant goad; (4) a mirror; (5) a drum; (6) a banner; (7) a water vase; (8) a lamp.

The Jains also adopted a list of eight auspicious symbols, which probably slightly pre-

dates the Buddhist group. This Jain list comprised of: (1) a treasure vase; (2) a water flask; (3) two golden fishes; (4) a swastika; (5) an endless knot; (6) a hair-curl; (7) a mirror; (8) a throne. In Nepal the Newar Buddhist form of the *astamangala* replaces the golden wheel with a pair of flywhisks or *chamara* (see page 177), and commonly these eight Newari symbols form a composite vase-shaped arrangement.

In the Buddhist tradition these eight symbols of good fortune represent the offerings presented by the great Vedic gods to Shakyamuni Buddha upon his attainment of enlightenment. Brahma was the first of these gods to appear before the Buddha, and he presented a thousand-spoked golden wheel as a symbolic request for the Buddha to teach through 'turning the wheel of the *dharma*'. The great sky god Indra appeared next, and he presented his mighty white conch-shell horn as a symbolic request for the Buddha to 'proclaim the truth of the *dharma*'. In Tibetan paintings of the Buddha's enlightenment the supplicating forms



The eight auspicious symbols: top row, from left – the parasol; the golden fishes; the treasure vase; the lotus; bottom row, from left – the right-turning conch shell; the endless knot; the victory banner; and the wheel.

of four-faced yellow Brahma and white Indra are traditionally shown kneeling before the Buddha's throne, where they offer their respective symbols of a golden wheel and a white conch. The earth goddess Sthavara (Tib. *Sa'i Lha-mo*), who had borne witness to the Buddha's enlightenment, presented Shakyamuni with a golden vase full of the nectar of immortality.

In early Indian Buddhism the image of the Buddha was depicted in an aniconic or non-representational form, usually by an empty throne under a parasol and *bodhi-*

tree, or by a stone impression of his divinely marked footprints. These footprints display various auspicious symbols as insignia of the Buddha's divinity, such as the victory banner, lion throne, trident, Three Jewels, eternal knot, swastika, conch, and pair of fishes, but the most common of these insignia were the lotus and the wheel. In early Vajrayana Buddhism the eight auspicious symbols were deified into eight goddesses, known as the Astamangala Devi, each of whom carry one of the auspicious symbols as an attribute.

In Chinese Buddhism these eight symbols represent the eight vital organs of the Buddha's body: (1) the parasol represents his spleen; (2) the two golden fishes his kidneys; (3) the treasure vase his stomach; (4) the lotus his liver; (5) the conch his gall bladder; (6) the endless knot his intestines; (7) the victory banner his lungs; (8) the golden wheel his heart. A similar Tibetan tradition identifies these eight symbols as forming the physical body of the Buddha, with: (1) the parasol representing his head; (2) the golden fishes his eyes; (3) the treasure vase his neck; (4) the lotus his tongue; (5) the wheel his feet; (6) the victory banner his body; (7) the conch his speech; (8) the endless knot his mind.

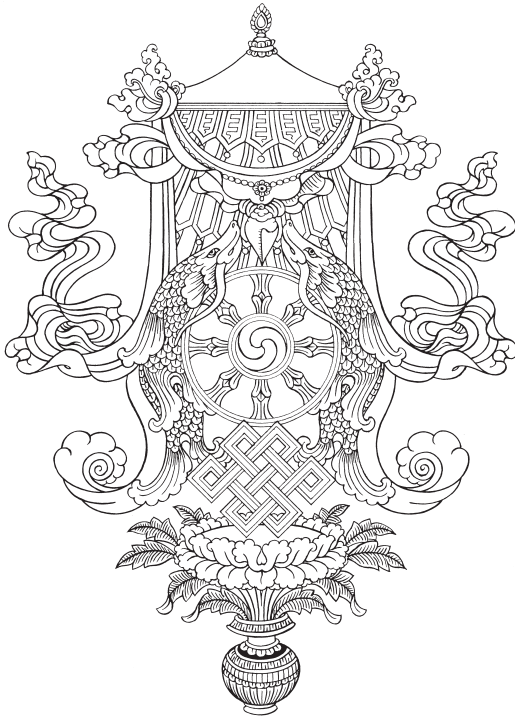
In Tibetan art the eight auspicious symbols may be depicted individually, in pairs,

in fours, or as a composite group of eight. When illustrated as a composite group they often assume the simulacra shape of a vase. In this form the treasure vase may be omitted, as the other seven symbols embody the symbolic wealth of this vase in their vase-shaped outline. Designs of these eight symbols of good fortune adorn all manner of sacred and secular Buddhist objects, such as carved wooden furniture, embellished metalwork, ceramics, wall panels, carpets, and silk brocades. They are also drawn upon the ground in sprinkled flour or colored powders to welcome visiting religious dignitaries to monastic establishments.

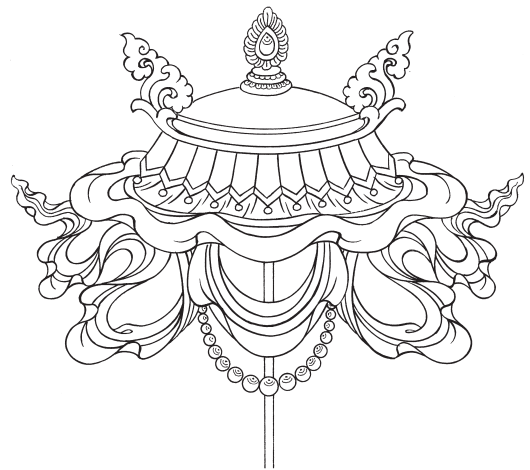
THE PARASOL

(Skt. *chatra*, *atapatra*; Tib. *gdugs*)

The parasol or umbrella is a traditional Indian symbol of royalty and protection. Its shadow protects from the blazing heat of the tropical sun, and the coolness of its shade symbolizes protection from the painful heat of suffering, desire, obstacles, illnesses, and

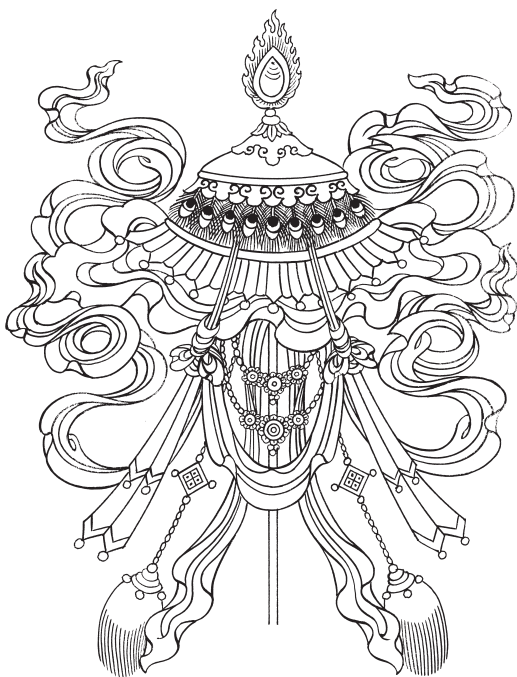


*The eight auspicious symbols
as a composite group.*



The parasol.

harmful forces. As a symbol of royalty or secular wealth, the greater the number of parasols carried in the entourage of a dignity, the higher his social rank would appear. Traditionally thirteen parasols defined the status of a king, and the early Indian Buddhists adopted this number as a symbol of the sovereignty of the Buddha as the ‘universal monarch’ or *chakravartin*. Thirteen stacked umbrella-wheels form the conical spires of the various *stupas* that commemorated the main events of the Buddha’s life, or enshrined his relics. This practice was later applied to virtually all Tibetan Buddhist *stupa* designs. The great Indian teacher, Dipankara Atisha, who revived Buddhism in Tibet during the eleventh century, was reputed to have qualified for a retinue of thirteen parasols.



An elaborate parasol with peacock feathers, jeweled chains, hanging yak tails, and silk valances.

As the parasol is held above the head it naturally symbolizes honor and respect, and it is for this reason that the parasol became such a prominent aniconic symbol in early Buddhist art. A jeweled parasol was reputedly offered to the Buddha by the king of the serpent-spirits or *nagas*. This parasol was fashioned of gold, with nectar-emitting jewels around its edges. It was hung with sweetly tinkling bells, and had a handle made of sapphire. Images of the Buddha often display an elaborate large white umbrella above his head, and this ‘large umbrella’ (Skt. *atapatra*) was later deified into the Vajrayana goddess Sitatapatra (Tib. *gDugs-dKar*). Sitatapatra, meaning the ‘White Umbrella’, is one of the most complex of all Vajrayana deities, with a thousand arms, feet, and heads, and a ‘thousand million’ eyes. The two-armed form of this goddess is often serenely depicted holding her white umbrella above the seated form of the Buddha.

The typical Buddhist parasol is fashioned from a long white or red sandalwood handle or axle-pole, which is embellished at its top with a small golden lotus, vase, and jewel filial. Over its domed frame is stretched white or yellow silk, and from the circular rim of this frame hangs a pleated silk frieze with many multicolored silk pendants and valances. An ornate golden crest-bar with *makara*-tail scrolling (see page 77) generally defines the parasol’s circular rim, and its hanging silk frieze may also be embellished with peacock feathers, hanging jewel chains, and yak-tail pendants. A ceremonial silk parasol is traditionally around four feet in diameter, with a long axle-pole that enables it to be held at least three feet above the head. Square and octagonal parasols are also common, and large yellow or red silk parasols are frequently suspended above the throne of the presiding lama, or above the central deity image in monastic assembly-

halls. The white or yellow silk parasol is an ecclesiastic symbol of sovereignty, whilst a peacock feather parasol more specifically represents secular authority.

The dome of the parasol represents wisdom, and its hanging silk valances the various methods of compassion or skilful means. The white parasol that was presented to the Buddha essentially symbolizes his ability to protect all beings from delusions and fears.

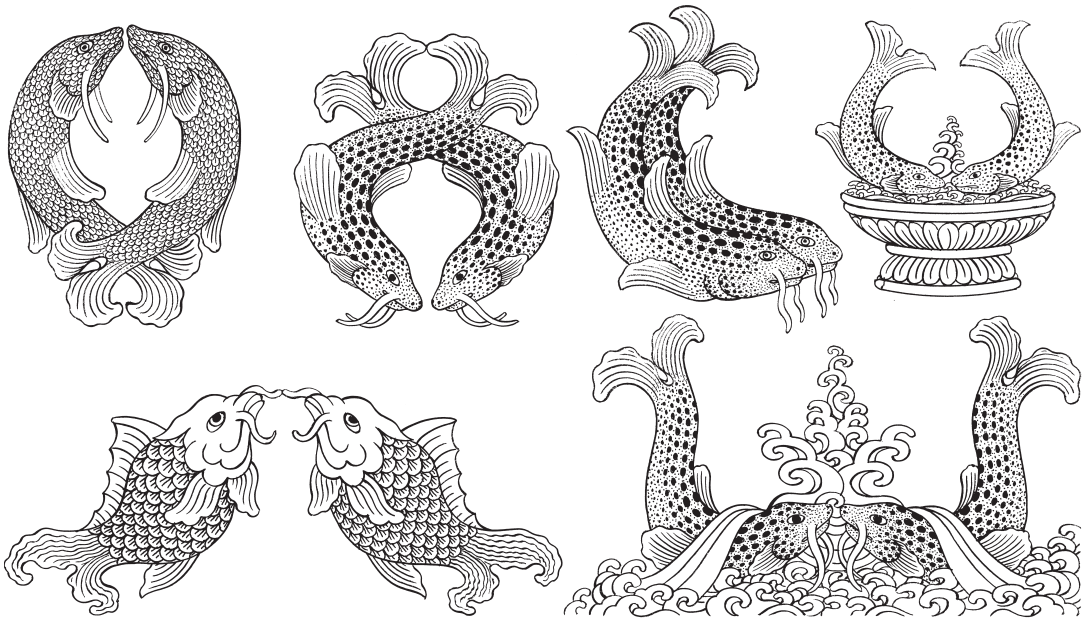
THE GOLDEN FISHES

(Skt. *suvarnamatsya*; Tib. *gser-nya*)

In Sanskrit the pair of fishes is known by the term *matsyayugma*, meaning 'coupled fish'. This alludes to their origin as an ancient symbol of the two main sacred rivers of India, the Ganges (Ganga) and Yamuna. Symbolically these two great rivers represent

the lunar and solar channels or psychic nerves (Skt. *nadi*), which originate in the nostrils and carry the alternating rhythms of breath or *prana*.

In Buddhism the golden fishes represent happiness and spontaneity, as they have complete freedom of movement in the water. They represent fertility and abundance, as they multiply very rapidly. They represent freedom from the restraints of caste and status, as they mingle and touch readily. Fish often swim in pairs, and in China a pair of fishes symbolize conjugal unity and fidelity, with a brace of fishes being traditionally given as a wedding present. As fish were so plentiful in China, and formed an important part of the staple diet, the Chinese word *yu*, meaning both 'fish' and 'great wealth', became synonymous with material prosperity. In the Chinese tradition of *feng-shui* the keeping of goldfish is similarly believed to attract wealth.



Various examples of the two golden fishes.

The auspicious symbol of a pair of fishes is common to the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions. In ancient Egypt a pair of fishes symbolized the fertile waters of the River Nile. The early Christians adopted the paired fishes as an emblem of Christ as the 'fisher of men', and acrostically interpreted the letters of the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, to mean 'Jesus Christ, of God the Son and Savior'.

The two golden fishes, a male and a female, are usually depicted symmetrically and in the form of carp, with graceful tails, gills, and fins, and long tendrils extending from their upper jaws. Carp are traditionally regarded as sacred fish in the orient, on account of their elegant beauty, size, and longevity, and because of their association with certain benevolent deities. The paired fish are often depicted with their noses touching, and in Hinduism this is a symbol of the female sexual organ or *yoni*. A golden fish is the attribute of the great Indian *Mahasiddha* Tilopa, symbolizing both his realization and his ability to liberate beings from the ocean of cyclic existence (Skt. *samsara*). The auspicious symbol of the two fishes that were presented to the Buddha was probably embroidered in gold thread upon a piece of Benares silk.

THE TREASURE VASE

(Skt. *nidhana-kumbha*; Tib. *gter-gyi bum-pa*)

The golden treasure vase, or 'vase of inexhaustible treasures', is modeled upon the traditional Indian clay water pot. This pot is known as a *kalasha* or *kumbha*, with a flat base, round body, narrow neck, and fluted upper rim. This womb-like sacred *kumbha* is venerated in India at the great religious 'pot festival' of the *Kumbh Mela*. This



The golden treasure vase.

festival (Skt. *mela*) is held in rotation every three years at the cities of Allahabad, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujain, and commemorates the spilling of the divine nectar of the gods (Skt. *amrita*) at these four sacred sites (see Appendix 1).

The treasure vase is predominantly a symbol of certain wealth deities, including Jambhala, Vaishravana, and Vasudhara, where it often appears as an attribute beneath their feet. One form of the wealth goddess Vasudhara stands upon a pair of horizontal treasure vases that spill an endless stream of jewels. As the divine 'vase of plenty' (Tib. *bum-pa bzang-po*) it possesses the quality of spontaneous manifestation, because however much treasure is removed from the vase it remains perpetually full.

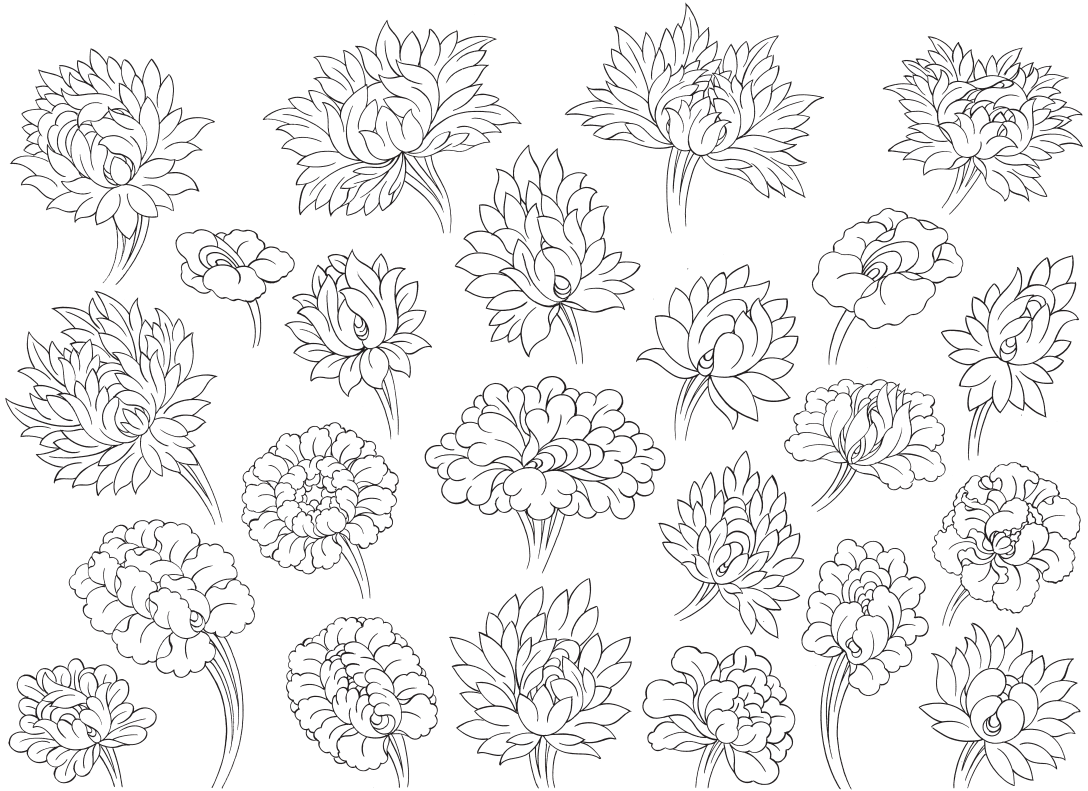
The typical Tibetan treasure vase is represented as a highly ornate golden vase, with lotus-petal motifs radiating around its various sections. A single wish-granting gem, or a group of three gems, seals its upper rim as a symbol of the Three Jewels of the Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*. The

great treasure vase (Tib. *gter chen-po'i bum-pa*), as described in the Buddhist mandala offering, is fashioned from gold and studded with a multitude of precious gems. A silk scarf from the god realm is tied around its neck, and its top is sealed with a wish-granting tree. The roots of this tree infuse the contained waters of longevity, miraculously creating all manner of treasures. Sealed treasure vases may be placed or buried at sacred geomantic locations, such as mountain passes, pilgrimage sites, springs, rivers, and oceans. Here their function is both to spread abundance to the environment and to appease the indigenous spirits who abide in these places.

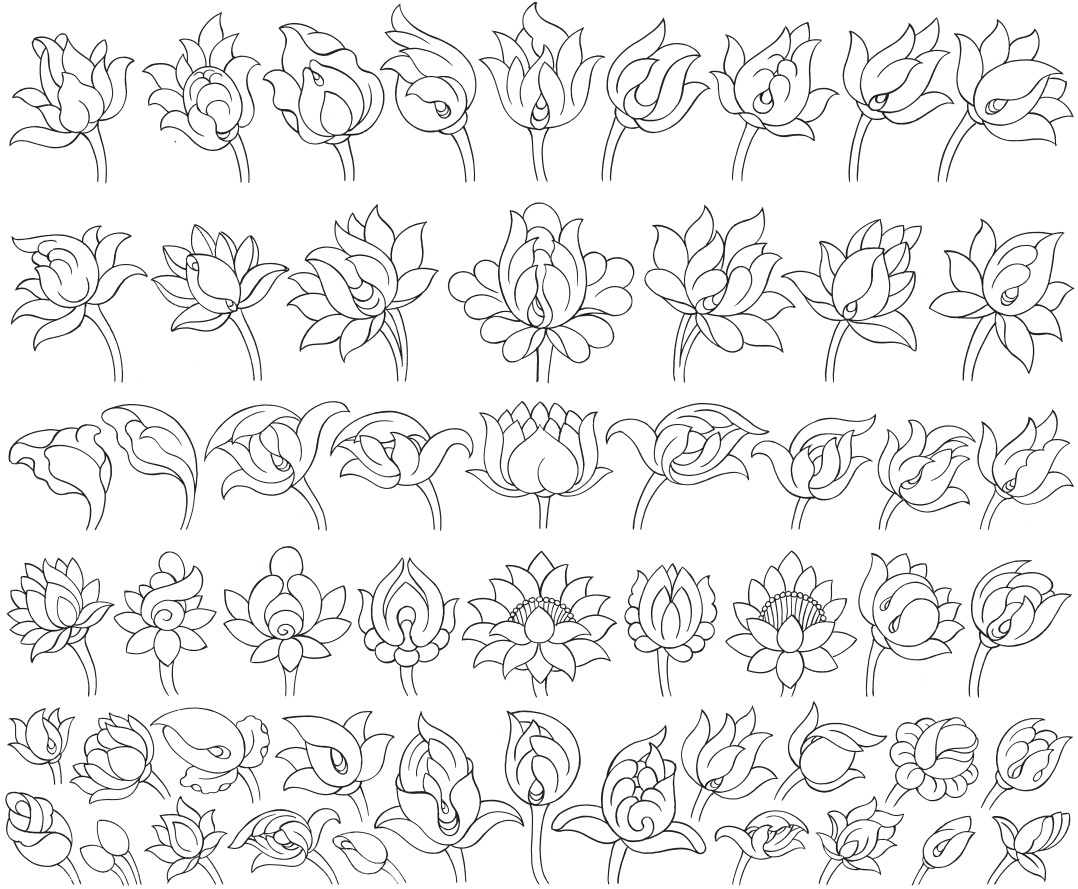
THE LOTUS

(Skt. *padma*, *kamala*; Tib. *pad-ma*; *chuskyes*)

The Indian lotus, which grows from the dark watery mire but is unstained by it, is a major Buddhist symbol of purity and renunciation. It represents the blossoming of wholesome activities, which are performed with complete freedom from the faults of cyclic existence. The lotus seats upon which deities sit or stand symbolize their divine origin. They are immaculately conceived, innately perfect, and absolutely pure in their body, speech, and mind. The deities manifest into cyclic existence, yet they are completely



Lotuses stylized as peony and chrysanthemum blossoms.



Lotus and flower buds.

uncontaminated by its defilements, emotional hindrances, and mental obscurations.

As a sacred symbol the lotus was adopted by many of the world's great civilizations, from Egypt to Japan, and widely incorporated into their arts and architecture. The lotus opens and closes with the sun, and in ancient Egypt the sun was conceived of as rising from an eastern lotus at dawn, and setting into a western lotus at sunset. Similarly Surya, the Vedic sun god, holds a lotus in each of his hands, symbolizing the sun's path across the heavens. Brahma, the Vedic god of creation, was born from a golden

lotus that grew from the navel of Vishnu, like a lotus growing from an umbilical stem. Padmasambhava, the 'lotus born' tantric master who introduced Buddhism into Tibet, was similarly divinely conceived from a miraculous lotus, which blossomed upon Dhanakosha Lake in the western Indian kingdom of Uddiyana. The lotus, as a divine womb or vagina, is a potent sexual metaphor in both Hindu and Buddhist tantra. *Padma* and *kamala* are synonymous Sanskrit terms for the 'lotus' of the female vagina, which is soft, pink, and open. Likewise the *vajra* is synonymous with the male

penis, which is hard and penetrative. The union of *vajra* and *padma* is a sexual symbol for the union of form and emptiness, or skillful means and wisdom. On an inner level this union symbolizes the penetration and ascent of the psychic winds into the subtle body's central channel, which pierces and opens the 'lotuses' of the channel-wheels or *chakras* (see Appendix 3).

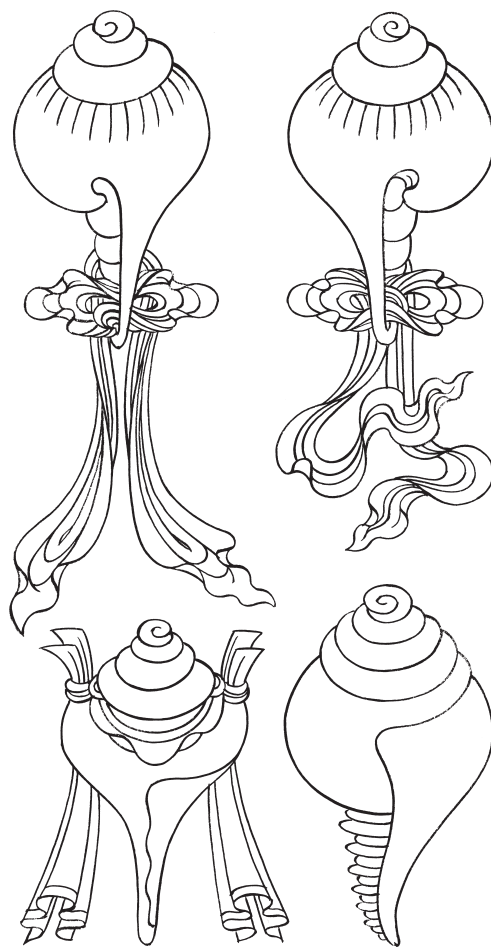
The lotus is the emblem of Amitabha, the red Buddha of the west and the 'Lord of the *Padma* or Lotus Family'. Amitabha's qualities are indicative of the redness of fire, vital fluids, evening twilight, the summer season, and the transmutation of passion into discriminating awareness. Amitabha's consort is Pandara, whose attribute is also a red lotus. Amitabha's presiding Bodhisattva is Padmapani Avalokiteshvara, the 'Holder of the Lotus', and the Bodhisattva of great compassion.

The Buddhist lotus is described as having four, eight, sixteen, twenty-four, thirty-two, sixty-four, a hundred, or a thousand petals. These numbers symbolically correspond to the internal lotuses or *chakras* of the subtle-body, and to the numerical components of the mandala. As a hand-held attribute the lotus is usually colored pink or light red, with eight or sixteen petals. Lotus blossoms may also be colored white, yellow, golden, blue, and black. The white or 'edible lotus' (Skt. *pundarika*; Tib. *pad-ma dkar-po*) is an attribute of the Buddha Sikhin, and a sixteen-petaled white *utpala* lotus is held by White Tara. The yellow lotus (Tib. *pad-ma ser-po*) and the golden lotus (Tib. *gser-gyi pad-ma*) are generally known as *padma*, and the more common red or pink lotus is usually identified as the *kamala*. The Sanskrit term *utpala* is specifically identified with the blue or black 'night lotus', but its transliterated Tibetan equivalent (Tib. *ut-pa-la*) may be applied to any color of lotus.

THE RIGHT-TURNING CONCH SHELL

(Skt. *dakshinavarta-shankha*; Tib. *dung gyas-'khyil*)

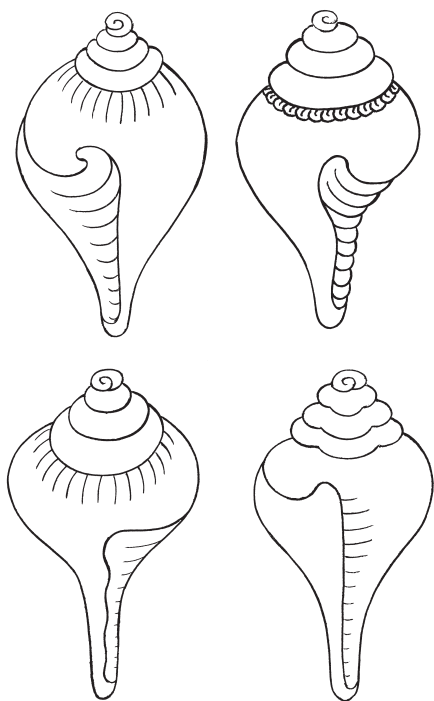
The white conch shell, which spirals towards the right in a clockwise direction, is an ancient Indian attribute of the heroic gods, whose mighty conch shell horns proclaimed their valor and victories in war.



Four examples of white conch shells, with the upper left conch turning toward the left, and the upper right turning toward the right.

Vishnu's fire-emanating conch was named Panchajanya, meaning 'possessing control over the five classes of beings'. Arjuna's conch was known as Devadatta, meaning 'god-given', whose triumphant blast struck terror in the enemy. As a battle horn the conch is akin to the modern bugle, as an emblem of power, authority, and sovereignty. Its auspicious blast is believed to banish evil spirits, avert natural disasters, and scare away harmful creatures.

Vishnu's fiery conch (Panchajanya) is held in his upper left hand and paired with the wheel or *chakra* in his upper right hand. These two attributes are commonly held by the first five of Vishnu's ten *avatars* or incarnations: Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Narasingha (the man-lion), and Vamana (the dwarf). In the



White conch shells.

Hindu tradition the Buddha is recognized as the ninth of Vishnu's ten incarnations. It is perhaps more than coincidental that the two great heavenly gods, Indra and Brahma, are traditionally painted before the Buddha's throne offering the attributes of Vishnu's conch and wheel. Vishnu is also commonly known as the 'great man' (Skt. *mahapurusha*) or 'right-hand god' (Skt. *dakshinadeva*). These appellations are similarly applied to the Buddha, with his right-curling hair, and his body endowed with the thirty-two auspicious marks of the great man (Skt. *mahapurusha-lakshana*).

Early Hinduism classified the conch into gender varieties, with the thicker-shelled bulbous conch being the male or *purusha*, and the thinner-shelled slender conch being the female or *shankhini*. The fourfold Hindu caste division was also applied: with the smooth white conch representing the priestly or *brahmin* caste, the red conch the warrior or *kshatriya* caste, the yellow conch the merchant or *vaishya* caste, and the dull gray conch the laborer or *shudra* caste. A further division was made between the common conch shell, which naturally spirals to the left and is known as a *vamavarta*; and the more rare right-spiraling conch shell, which is known as a *dakshinavarta* and is considered most auspicious for ritual use. The tip of the conch shell is sawn off to form a mouthpiece, and the right-spiraling wind passage thus created acoustically symbolizes the true or 'right-hand' (Skt. *dakshina*) proclamation of the *dharma*.

Brahmanism adopted the heroic conch as a ritual symbol of religious sovereignty. The early Buddhists similarly adopted it as an emblem of the supremacy of the Buddha's teachings. Here the conch symbolizes his fearlessness in proclaiming the truth of the *dharma*, and his call to awaken and work for the benefit of others. One of the thirty-

two major signs of the Buddha's body is his deep and resonant conch-like voice, which resounds throughout the ten directions of space. Iconographically the three conch-like curved lines on his throat represent this sign.

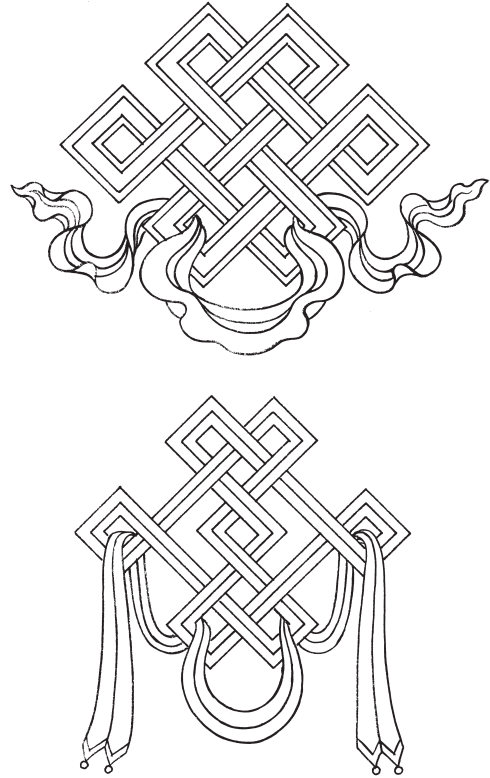
As one of the eight auspicious symbols the white conch is usually depicted vertically, often with a silk ribbon threaded through its lower extremity. Its right spiral is indicated by the curve and aperture of its mouth, which faces towards the right. The conch may also appear as a horizontally positioned receptacle for aromatic liquids or perfumes (see page 33). As a hand-held attribute, symbolizing the proclamation of the *Buddhadharma* as the aspect of speech, the conch is usually held in the left 'wisdom' hand of deities.

THE ENDLESS OR GLORIOUS KNOT

(Skt. *shrivatsa*, *granthi*; Tib. *dpal be'u*)

The Sanskrit term *shrivatsa* means 'beloved of Shri'. Shri refers to the goddess Lakshmi; the consort of Vishnu, and the *shrivatsa* is an auspicious mark or hair-curl that adorns the breast of Vishnu. Lakshmi's insignia on Vishnu's breast represents the devotion in his heart for his consort, and since Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and good fortune the *shrivatsa* forms a natural auspicious symbol. The *shrivatsa* either takes the form of a triangular swirl, or an upright diamond with loops at its four inter-cardinal corners. Krishna, as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, also bears the *shrivatsa* at the center of his chest.

Another name given to this hair-curl is *nandyavarta*, which means 'curl of happiness', and this curl is shaped like a swastika or a Greek hooked-cross (Gk. *gammadion*). Indian and Chinese representations of the Buddha frequently show the *nandyavarta* or



Two examples of endless knots with threaded silk scarves.

swastika on his breast as a symbol of his enlightened mind. Another possible derivation of both the endless knot and swastika arose from the S-shaped markings on the hood of the cobra. This in turn gave rise to the *nagayatra*, where two or more entwining snakes form an endless knot design or *yantra*. The endless knot or *granthi* also appears on clay seals from the early Indus valley civilization (circa 2500 BCE). In its final evolution as a geometric Buddhist symbol the eternal knot or 'lucky diagram', which is described as 'turning like a swastika', was identified with the *shrivatsa-svastika*, since these parallel symbols were common to most early Indian traditions of the *astamangala*.

The eternal, endless, or mystic knot is common to many ancient traditions, and became particularly innovative in Islamic and Celtic designs. In China it is a symbol of longevity, continuity, love, and harmony. As a symbol of the Buddha's mind the eternal knot represents the Buddha's endless wisdom and compassion. As a symbol of the Buddha's teachings it represents the continuity of the 'twelve links of dependent origination', which underlies the reality of cyclic existence.

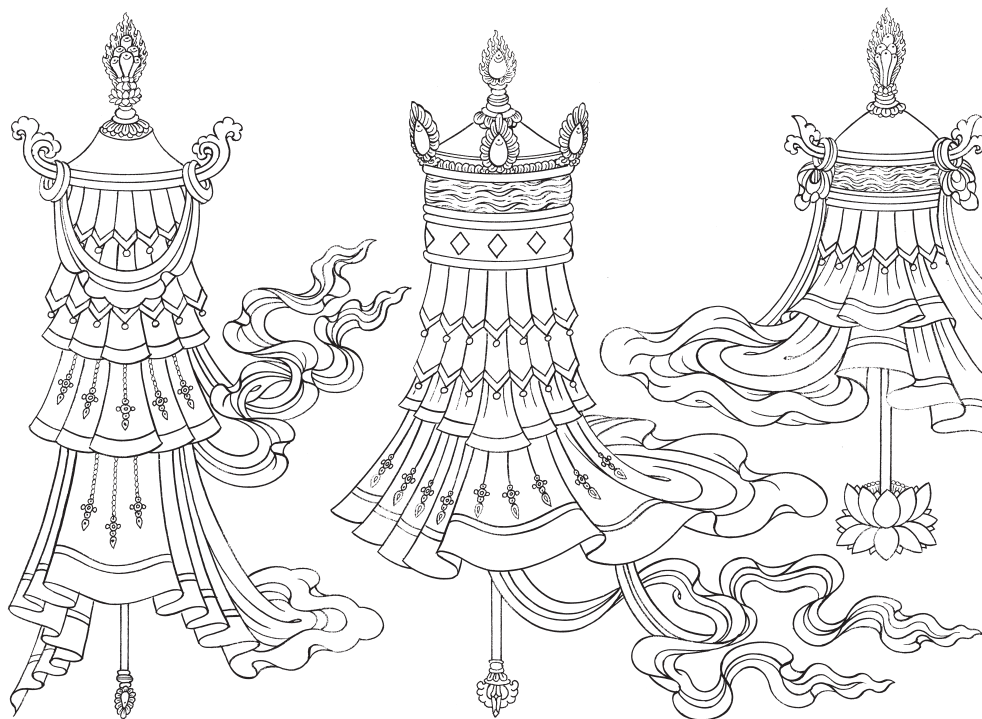
THE VICTORY BANNER

(Skt. *dhvaja*; Tib. *rgyal-mtshan*)

The *dhvaja*, meaning banner, flag, or ensign, was originally a military standard of ancient

Indian warfare. This standard adorned the rear of a great warrior's chariot, and was mounted behind the great parasol (Skt. *ataptra*), or royal parasol (Skt. *chatra*). Each standard bore the specific ensign of its champion or king. Krishna's chariot was adorned with a *garuda*-topped banner. Arjuna's bore the device of a monkey. Bhishma's bore the emblem of a palm tree. But primarily the *dhvaja* was the ensign of Shiva, the great god of death and destruction, whose banner was topped with a trident. This trident symbolized Shiva's victory over the three worlds, or the 'three cities', which were located above, upon, and below the earth.

In Indian warfare the military banner frequently took on horrific forms that were designed to instill terror in the enemy. The impaled head and flayed skin of an enemy or



Three examples of the victory banner, with the two on the right adorned with a frieze of tiger-skin.

victim was one such gruesome emblem. The heads and skins of ferocious animals, particularly those of the tiger, crocodile, wolf, and bull, were commonly employed. Large effigies were also fashioned of other frightening creatures, such as the scorpion, snake, vulture, raven, and *garuda*.

The crocodile-headed banner or *makaradhvaja* was originally an emblem of Kamadeva, the Vedic god of love and desire. As the ‘tempter’ (Skt. *mara*), or ‘deluder’ (Skt. *maya*), Kamadeva was the Hindu counterpart of 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 a group of four *maras* or ‘evil influences’. These four *maras* were originally based upon the four divisions of Mara’s army: infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots. The first of these four *maras* is the demon of the five aggregates of the personality (*Skhanda-mara*). The second is the demon of emotional defilements (*Klesha-mara*). The third is the demon of death (*Mriyu-mara*). The fourth is the ‘son of the god Mara’ (*Devaputra-mara*), or the demon of desire and temptation. It is this fourth *mara*, *Devaputra-mara*, who is identified as Kamadeva, the ‘king of the gods of the highest desire realm’. The Buddha is said to have defeated the sensual temptations of Kamadeva in the dusk before his enlightenment by meditating upon the ‘four immeasurables’ of compassion, love, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. At dawn he overcame both the *mara* of the aggregates and the *mara* of defilements. But it was only three months before the end of his long life that he finally overcame the *mara* of death, through the power of his fearless resolve to enter into the ultimate *nirvana* (*parinirvana*).

As a symbol of the Buddha’s victory over the four *maras*, the early Buddhists adopted

Kamadeva’s emblem of the crocodile-headed *makaradhvaja*, and four of these banners were erected in the cardinal directions surrounding the enlightenment *stupa* of the *Tathagata* or Buddha. Similarly the gods elected to place a banner of victory on the summit of Mt Meru, to honor the Buddha as the ‘Conqueror’ (Skt. *jina*; Tib. *rgyal-ba*) who vanquished the armies of Mara. This ‘victorious banner of the ten directions’ is described as having a jeweled pole, a crescent moon and sun finial, and a hanging triple-banderole of three colored silks that are decorated with the ‘three victorious creatures of harmony’ (see pages 50 and 176).

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 banner’s design can be seen on monastery and temple roofs, where four banners are commonly placed at the roof’s corners to symbolize the Buddha’s victory over the four *maras*. In its most traditional form the victory banner is fashioned as a cylindrical ensign mounted upon a long wooden axle-pole. The top of the banner takes the form of a small white parasol, which is surmounted by a central wish-granting gem. This domed parasol is rimmed by an ornate golden crest-bar with *makara*-tailed ends, from which hangs a billowing yellow or white silk scarf. The cylindrical body of the banner is draped with overlapping vertical layers of multi-colored silk valances and hanging jewels. A billowing silk apron with flowing ribbons adorns its base. The upper part of the cylinder is often decorated with a frieze of tiger-skin, symbolizing the Buddha’s victory over all anger and aggression. As a hand-held ensign the victory banner is an attribute of many deities, particularly those associated with wealth and power, such as

Vaishravana, the Great Guardian King of the north.

THE WHEEL

(Skt. *chakra*; Tib. *'khor-lo*)

The wheel is an early Indian solar symbol of sovereignty, protection, and creation. As a solar symbol it first appears on clay seals unearthed from the Harappan civilization of the Indus valley (circa 2500 BCE). The wheel or *chakra* is the main attribute of the Vedic god of preservation, Vishnu, whose fiery six-spoked *Sudarshana-chakra* or discus represents the wheel of the phenomenal universe. The wheel represents motion, continuity, and change, forever turning onwards like the circling sphere of the heavens. As a weapon the rimless *chakra* had six, eight,

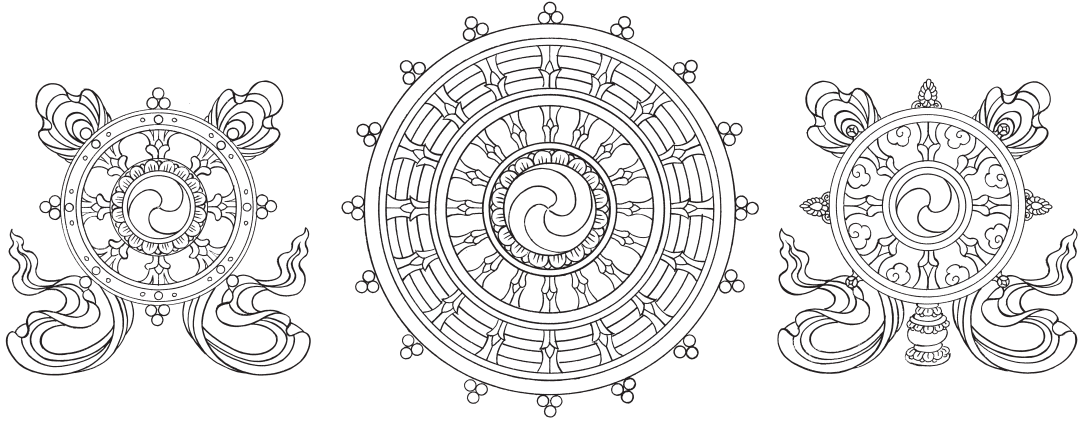


The eight-spoked golden wheel.

ten, twelve, or eighteen sharply pointed blades, and could be hurled like a discus or swung upon a rope. The wooden wheels of the ancient India chariot similarly bore an equal number of spokes.

Buddhism adopted the wheel as the main emblem of the 'wheel-turning' *chakravartin* or 'universal monarch', identifying this wheel as the *dharmachakra* or 'wheel of *dharma*' of the Buddha's teachings. The Tibetan term for *dharmachakra* (Tib. *chos-kyi 'khor-lo*) literally means the 'wheel of transformation' or spiritual change. The wheel's swift motion represents the rapid spiritual transformation revealed in the Buddha's teachings. The wheel's comparison to the rotating weapon of the *chakravartin* represents its ability to cut through all obstacles and illusions. The Buddha's first discourse at the Deer Park in Sarnath, where he first taught the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path, is known as his 'first turning of the wheel of *dharma*'. His subsequent great discourses at Rajghir and Shravasti are known as his second and third turnings of the wheel of *dharma*.

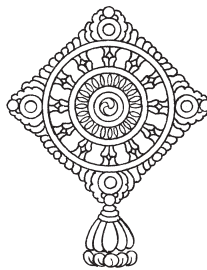
The three components of the wheel - hub, spokes, and rim - symbolize the three aspects of the Buddhist teachings upon ethics, wisdom, and concentration. The central hub represents ethical discipline, which centers and stabilizes the mind. The sharp spokes represent wisdom or discriminating awareness, which cuts through ignorance. The rim represents meditative concentration, which both encompasses and facilitates the motion of the wheel. A wheel with a thousand spokes, which emanate like the rays of the sun, represents the thousand activities and teachings of the Buddhas. A wheel with eight spokes symbolizes the Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path, and the transmission of these teachings towards the eight directions.



Two eight-spoked golden wheels to the right and left, with a sixteen-spoked double wheel at the center.

The auspicious wheel is described as being fashioned from pure gold obtained from the Jambud River of our 'world continent', Jambudvīpa. It is traditionally depicted with eight *vajra*-like spokes, and a central hub with three or four rotating 'swirls of joy' (Tib. *dga' 'khyil*), which spiral outward like a Chinese *yin-yang* symbol. When three swirls are shown in the central hub they represent the Three Jewels of the Buddha, *dharmā*, and *saṅgha*, and victory over the three poisons of ignorance, desire, and aversion. When four swirls are depicted they are usually colored to

correspond to the four directions and elements, and symbolize the Buddha's teachings upon the Four Noble Truths. The rim of the wheel may be depicted as a simple circular ring, often with small circular gold embellishments extending towards the eight directions. Alternatively it may be depicted within an ornate pear-shaped surround, which is fashioned from scrolling gold embellishments with inset jewels. A silk ribbon is often draped behind the wheel's rim, and the bottom of the wheel usually rests upon a small lotus base.



THE EIGHT AUSPICIOUS SUBSTANCES



The eight auspicious substances (Skt. *astamangaladravya*; Tib. *bkra-shis rdzas-brgyad*) or ‘bringers of good fortune’ form the second main group of early Buddhist symbols. They consist of: (1) a mirror; (2) precious medicine; (3) yogurt or curds; (4) *durva* grass; (5) *bilva* fruit; (6) a white conch shell; (7) cinnabar or vermilion powder; (8) mustard seed. Like the eight auspicious symbols, these eight items are probably also of pre-Buddhist origin and were adopted into early Buddhism during the period of its initial inception. They represent a specific group of offerings that were presented to the Buddha as symbols of his Eightfold Noble Path of right view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation. Like the eight auspicious symbols, the eight auspicious substances were later deified in Vajrayana Buddhism to form a group of eight offering goddesses.

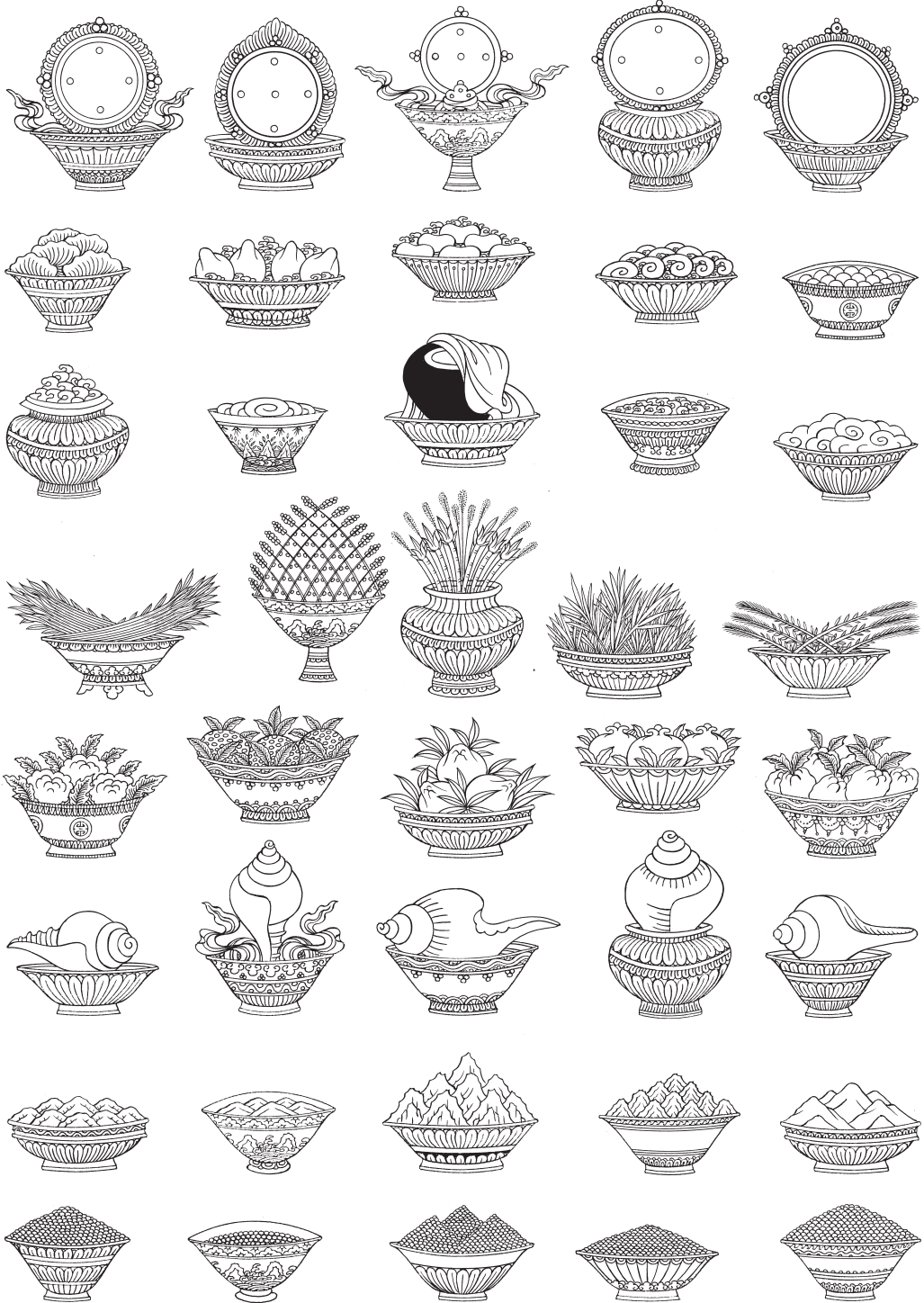
The mirror represents the radiant offering goddess of light, Prabhavati (Tib. ‘*Od’chang-ma*), who presented Shakyamuni with a stainless mirror, symbolizing both the

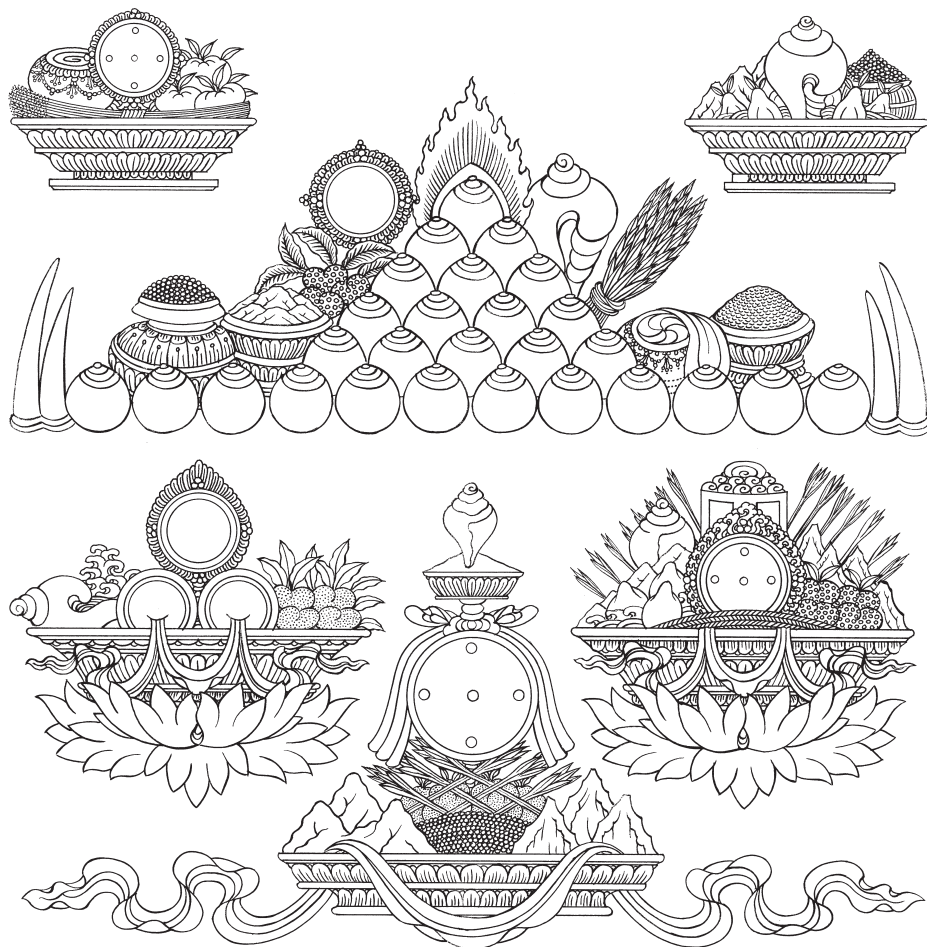
clarity of his realization and the unerring karmic vision of all his previous lives. The mirror represents right thought or analysis, as it truthfully reflects all things as they are, without favoritism, prejudice, delusion, or distortion.

The medicine (Skt. *gorochana*), derived from the vital glands in the forehead of an elephant, represents the great guardian elephant Dhanapala (Tib. *Nor-skyong*), who protected the meadows at Bodh Gaya where the Buddha attained enlightenment. This medicine represents right mindfulness, as it cures the disease of ignorance, which is the root cause of all suffering.

The curds represent the offering of milk rice that the farmer’s virtuous daughter

Facing page: *Various examples of the eight auspicious substances. The mirror (top row); the medicine (second row); the yogurt (third row); the durva grass (fourth row); the bilva fruit (fifth row); the conch (sixth row); the vermilion powder (seventh row); and the mustard seed (bottom row).*





Bowl containing the mirror, yogurt, bilva fruit, and durva grass (top left corner); bowl containing conch, medicine, vermilion, and mustard seed (top right corner). Immediately below are a cluster of jewels with the eight auspicious substances behind them. At the bottom center is a bowl containing the eight auspicious substances, with a further bowl of the eight auspicious substances to the right, and a bowl containing the five sense offerings to the left.

Sujata (Tib. *Legs-skyes-ma*) presented to the Buddha before he sat under the *bodhi*-tree. The curds represent right livelihood, as it is free from any impurity and is produced without harming any living creature.

The *durva* grass represents the eight armfuls of grass that were presented to the Buddha as a meditation seat by the grass-cutter

Mangala (Tib. *bKra-shis*). *Durva* grass is a symbol of longevity and tenacity, and represents right effort as the enduring resolve to practice the *dharma*.

The *bilva* fruit was presented to Shakyamuni by the god Brahma, and represents right action as the fruition of all virtuous activities.

The white right-spiraling conch shell was presented to the Buddha by the god Indra, and represents right speech as the proclamation of the *Buddhadharma*.

The *tilaka* or sacred mark of red cinnabar was applied to the Buddha's forehead by the Brahmin astrologer Jyotisharaja (Tib. *sKar-rgyal*), and represents right contemplation as the *samadhi* of one-pointed meditative equipoise.

The white mustard seed was presented to the Buddha by Vajrapani, the great Bodhisattva of power, and represents right view as the ability to annihilate all false views or notions.

The eight auspicious substances listed above also represent the four *karmas* or activities of an enlightened being. The mirror, medicine, and curds represent peaceful activities. The *durva* grass, *bilva* fruit, and conch shell represent activities of increase. The red vermilion powder represents the activity of subjugation, and the mustard seed represents wrathful or destructive activity.

Like the eight auspicious symbols these eight precious objects may be represented individually, with each object appearing alone or in a separate bowl. They may also be collectively grouped behind rows of offering jewels, in the branches of a small wish-granting tree, or in a shallow bowl or tray.

THE MIRROR

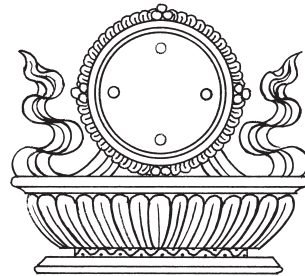
(Skt. *darpana*, *adarsha*; Tib. *me-long*)

The mirror, as the reflective 'witness' of light, represents form as the sense faculty of sight and the sense organ of the eye. Its function is to enable one to see oneself clearly, and as a cosmetic accessory or household object its auspicious importance is obvious. In Buddhism the mirror is a perfect symbol of emptiness or pure consciousness. The mirror

reflects all objects impartially, and yet remains completely unaffected by the images that arise in it. It reveals all phenomena to be void in essence. Like a 'passing show' it reflects all objects of the phenomenal world, but reveals them to be without substance.

In the ancient Indian ritual of *abhisheka*, meaning 'consecration by sprinkling', sacred images or ritual objects were ritually bathed, or consecrated by sprinkling. Pouring water over a mirror that reflected the image also cleansed the reflection of the sacred image. This rite is known as *pratibimba*, which literally means 'reflected'. In Tibet this ritual is known as the 'divine ablution' (Tib. *kbrus-gsol*), where water is sprinkled over the reflected image of a statue or *thangka*. The water, having bathed the form of the deity, is then considered to be consecrated water.

The mirror that the offering goddess Prabhavati presented to the Buddha was absolutely clear, flawless, bright, and untarnished. As a symbol of the enlightened mind it reflected everything perfectly, without distortion or impediment. Artistically the mirror is depicted as a small white or silver disc, with its perimeter usually decorated with a thin circular golden frame. A small central circle and four directional circles are often inscribed upon its surface, symbolizing the enlightened qualities and wisdoms of the Five Buddhas.



The mirror.

THE PRECIOUS MEDICINE

(Skt. *gorochana*; Tib. *gi-wang*)

The precious medicine is derived from the intestinal-stones or gallstones that are found in certain animals, particularly elephants, bears, and cattle. The Sanskrit term *gorochana* refers specifically to the stones or 'bezoars' found in cattle (Skt. *go*), such as the bull, cow, ox, and yak. The presence of bezoars is reputedly indicated by the snoring or nocturnal sounds that the animal makes in its sleep.

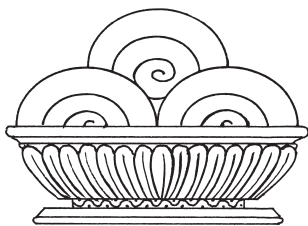
A Vedic legend relates how the god Indra once cast the five precious minerals: gold, silver, coral, pearl, and sapphire or turquoise, into the great ocean. These precious substances were eventually consumed by elephants, bears, snakes, frogs, vultures, geese, and pigeons, which then formed bezoars within their bodies. The intestinal stones obtained from these creatures consequently possess different colors and potencies. Their medicinal properties are reputed to counteract poisoning, promote clear thoughts, and alleviate fevers and contagious diseases. The superior, mediocre, and inferior forms of these stones are reputed to respectively cure seven, five, or three patients who have been poisoned.

The word 'bezoar' is derived from the Persian *pad-zhar*, meaning 'protecting against poisoning', and its general meaning is 'antidote'. In medieval European medical

traditions animal bezoars were highly esteemed as an antidote against the rather common practice of poisoning. Of particular value were the 'oriental bezoars' obtained from the East, which consisted of organic resin layers formed around a small foreign body. The common Indian antelope is known as the bezoar antelope, and the wild Persian goat as the bezoar goat. It is reputed that in Turkestan bezoars were ritually worshipped to bring rain. In Tibet small mineral stones, of a white or orange color, are found at hot springs as calcium and sulphur accretions. These calcified stones or 'pills' (Tib. *ril-bu*) are believed to possess similar medicinal qualities to animal bezoars.

It is believed that the finest quality of *gorochana* is obtained from the brain or forehead of an elephant, and the second best quality is obtained from the stomach of a cow. In size and appearance *gorochana* is said to resemble the yellow yoke of a boiled egg. The yellow pigment obtained from it is used as a tonic and sedative, and may also be applied as a sacred mark or *tilaka* to the forehead. When mixed with honey and applied to the eyes, *gorochana* is believed to bestow clear vision, enabling one to perceive all of the treasures of the world. Similarly the gray or white stone obtained from the crown of a king cobra's head is believed to enable a snake charmer to control all lesser serpents, and bestows immunity against their venom. The occidental 'toadstone', obtained from the skull of an old toad, was similarly credited with the antidotal qualities of serum.

In Tibetan art this precious medicine is represented in many different ways. It appears in the form of pills, or in the shape of an egg, bean, spiral, fruit, gland, or fungus. It is usually colored white or yellow, and is commonly illustrated as a solid oval shape suspended in a viscous white liquid.



The precious medicine.

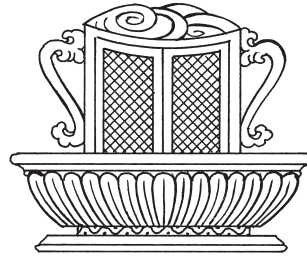
THE CURDS OR YOGURT

(Skt. *dadhi*; Tib. *zho*)

Curds have always been regarded as a pure and nourishing dietary supplement in India. In the Ayurvedic medical tradition curds are highly esteemed as a digestive stimulant, and are traditionally prescribed as a remedy for diarrhea and emaciation. Curds made from colostrum, the first milk that a cow gives after delivering a calf, are considered especially regenerative. The pure white nature of curds symbolizes spiritual nourishment and the abandonment of all negative actions. The ‘three white substances’, milk, curds, and ghee, which are derived from the sacred cow are viewed as the concentrated essence of plants, and are widely employed as purifying ingredients in many tantric rituals.

As one of the eight auspicious substances, curds symbolize the forty-nine-mouthful meal of milk-rice, which the fasting Buddha received from the cowherd girl, Sujata. This meal provided the fasting Buddha with the strength to attain enlightenment under the *bodhi*-tree, and to recognize with clarity the truth of the ‘middle way’. For this reason white curds or ‘nectar’ are often represented within the blue alms-bowl of the Buddha.

As a cool, heavy, creamy, smooth, and soft substance, curds personify the phlegmatic (*kapha*) humor or constitution of the water element. Because of this the eating of curds was not medically advised during the hot Indian summer and rainy season. The Indian monsoon, which occurs during the months of July and August, was traditionally a period in which the Buddhist *sangha* would undergo a seasonal meditation retreat. Curds were ritually consumed as the first celebratory meal after this rainy season retreat ended. In Tibet this tradition found continuity in the *Zhoton* or ‘curd festival’,



The yogurt.

held at great monasteries such as Sera and Drepung, where the monks would be served curds at the end of their hundred-day summer retreat.

The ‘three whites’ of milk, curds, and ghee, form three of the ‘five nectars’ obtained from the sacred cow, with the other two being urine and dung. For ritual purposes the cow’s urine and dung are collected in vessels before they touch the ground, and are then mixed with the three white substances in a bronze bowl. This mixture is then boiled. When cool the upper scum and lower sediment of this viscous liquid are discarded, leaving only the middle section, which is then spread and dried in the sun. The dried powder is then blended with saffron and made into small pills. In Tibet these pills (Tib. *ril-bu*) are employed in ritual practices, together with consecrated medicinal pills, known as *dutsi* (Tib. *bdud-rtsi*). The sacred cow, from which the five nectars are obtained, should be pregnant, of a golden or orange color, and endowed with intestinal stones or bezoars, from which the precious medicine *gorochana* is obtained.

THE DURVA GRASS

(Skt. *durva*; Tib. *rtsva dur-ba*)

Durva, *durba*, or *darbha* grass is a common grass with a variety of names. In the West it

is known as Bermuda grass (*Capriola dactylon*), Bahama grass, scutch grass, or devil grass, and is commonly grown as pasturage. In the East it is identified as ‘panic grass’ (*Panicum dactylon*) or ‘bent grass’. It also grows as a white species of grass, known in Sanskrit as *chanda*. *Durva* grass is very hardy, and grows as a ground-trailing grass with knotty stalks culminating in leafy heads. Its natural habitat is marsh or wetlands, but such is its durability that even when dry it will put out new shoots on contact with water.

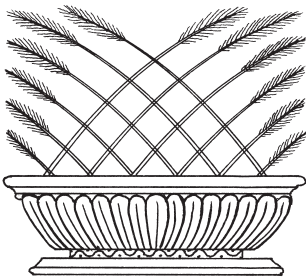
Durva grass was a prerequisite ingredient in the Vedic sacrifice or *yagna*. The Vedic altar itself was constructed of cow dung bricks bound together with knots of *durva* grass. In rites to propitiate the gods the Vedic priest often wore a finger ring woven from stalks of *durva* grass, representing the sacred knot or hair-curl (Skt. *shrivatsa*) of Vishnu.

The sacredness of *durva* grass originates from the accidental spilling of the *amrita* or ‘nectar of immortality’ during the legendary churning of the ocean, when a few drops of this nectar fell onto *durva* grass. A similar legend concerns the sacredness of *kusha* grass (*Poa cynosoroides*), where Garuda steals the vessel of *amrita* in order to ransom his mother who has been imprisoned by his enemies, the *naga* serpents. Garuda secretly

deposits this ransom vessel in a grove of *kusha* grass, but his deceitful act is witnessed by the god Indra, who swiftly removes the vessel of *amrita* from the grasp of the *nagas*. In their eagerness to consume the *amrita*, the *nagas* mistakenly identify the divine scent of the nectar with the *kusha* grass, and as they licked the sharp edges of the grass their tongues split into the forked tongues of serpents (see Appendix 1).

Durva and *kusha* grass became synonymously sacred, and both are commonly known as *darbha* grass. *Kusha* grass is a long brush-like grass, which grows to around two feet in height. In India a bundle of *kusha* stalks are bound together with a handle of coiled rope to produce the common household broom. Traditionally *kusha* grass was used to purify defilements, and Brahmins would sleep in a grove of *kusha* grass when ritual purification was required. The sharp points of a stalk of *kusha* grass proverbially symbolize a keen intellect, and in Buddhism the grass is believed to enhance the clarity of visualization and meditation. In many tantric initiations, such as the Kalachakra, two stems of *kusha* grass are employed to reveal clear dreams on the night prior to the initiation, with a long stalk being placed lengthwise under the mattress, and a short stalk placed horizontally under the pillow. *Kusha* grass soaked in water often provides the consecrated water used for oblations, and the sacrificial *homa* fire is initially kindled with a bundle of dried *kusha* grass.

On the eve of his enlightenment the future Buddha approached the sacred *bodhi*-tree, which stood within a meadow of soft grass. Here he was approached by the grass-cutter Mangala, who offered him eight armfuls of *kusha* grass as a meditation seat. From Vedic times a mat of woven *kusha* grass (Skt. *kushasana*) served as a sacred mat in religious ceremonies, and the Buddha



The *durva* grass.

was observing an age old tradition in using *kusha* grass as his seat or *asana*. Iconographically many Buddhist ascetics, *yogins*, and *siddhas* are depicted seated upon such woven *kusha* grass mats. The ancient capital of the Malla kingdom, where the Buddha attained his final *parinirvana*, is known as Kushinagara, which means ‘the city of *kusha* grass’. Artistically, both *durva* and *kusha* grass are represented with many stylistic variations in Tibetan art.

THE *BILVA* FRUIT

(Skt. *bilva*; Tib. *bil-ba*)

The *bilva* fruit (*Aegle marmelos*) is also known as the *bel* or *bael* fruit, and as the Bengal quince. It is a round fruit about the size of a large orange, with a hard skin and a dappled reddish-brown color. When British botanists were first confronted by the bewildering array of exotic Indian fruits during the early nineteenth century, they chose to rename many of these fruits in the then fashionable manner of the English apple, creating such names as the pineapple, custard apple, rose apple, and thorn apple. The *bilva* fruit, with its tough woody skin, was appropriately named the ‘wood apple’. Medicinally it is a potent astringent, and highly regarded for its purifying qualities in traditional Ayurvedic and Indian folk medicine. The unripe interior of the fruit, especially when boiled as a preservative jam, was the best-known cure for diarrhea and dysentery.

In ancient India the *bilva* was regarded as the most sacred of all fruits, and was used as the main food offering to the temple deities. Only in comparatively recent times has the coconut superseded the *bilva* as the principal fruit of religious offering, or as a symbol of self-surrender. The *bilva* tree is sacred to many Hindu deities, particularly

Shiva, Parvati, Lakshmi, Durga, and Surya. In an early Hindu legend the *bilva* tree is said to have originally germinated from the drops of sweat that fell from the forehead of the goddess Parvati onto Mt Mandara, the sacred hill that was used to churn the ocean in the Vedic creation legend. Its trifoliate leaves symbolize both the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (as creator, preserver, and destroyer), and the trident of Shiva. The tree is especially sacred to Shiva, who is often represented with a trifoliate *bilva* leaf crowning his matted hair. Wet *bilva* leaves are also traditionally placed upon the phallic stone symbol or *lingam* of Shiva as a cooling offering during the heat of an Indian summer. The tree is also the abode of the various *shaktis* or emanations of Shiva’s consort Parvati, and the breast-like fruit of the *bilva* is believed to contain the milk of the great mother goddesses or *matrikas*. The *bilva* fruit is also known as *shriphala*, meaning ‘the fruit of Shri’, which is another name for Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity.

Much of the Shaivite and Shakti symbolism applied to the *bilva* arose during the later Hindu tantric period, at a far later date than the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. But whatever its pre-Buddhist symbolism may have been, the *bilva* has been enduringly regarded as the most sacred of all fruits. Brahma, the Vedic god of creation,



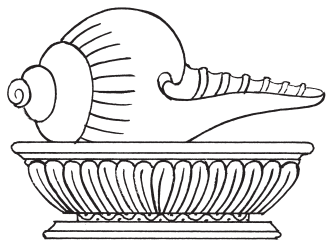
The *bilva* fruit.

is said to have presented Shakyamuni with the *bilva* fruit, and in this gesture of veneration and supplication he humbles himself before a wisdom-enlightenment greater than his own. Brahma is traditionally represented offering the golden wheel to Shakyamuni, but occasionally a tray containing bilva fruit may replace the wheel. In Tibetan art the *bilva* is often represented as a group of three fruits, symbolizing the Three Jewels. It is generally depicted like a pomegranate with a rounded nipple-like tip, and its trifoliate leaves may be depicted in a variety of stylized forms.

THE RIGHT-TURNING CONCH SHELL

(Skt. *dakshinavarta-shankha*; Tib. *dung gyas-'khyil*)

The right-spiraling white conch shell symbolizes the Buddha's proclamation of the *dharmā*, as previously described amongst the group of eight auspicious symbols (see page 9). This conch was presented to the Buddha by the great sky god Indra, who is traditionally depicted in Buddhist iconography holding this attribute in supplication before the Buddha. In this form Indra is identified as Shakra, the king of the gods, or as Shatakratu, an epithet of Indra meaning 'mighty' or 'one who has performed the sacrifice a hundred times'.



The right-turning conch shell.

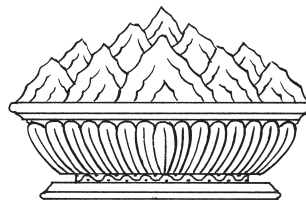
THE VERMILION POWDER

(Skt. *sindura*; Tib. *li-khri*)

A Brahmin named Jyotisharaja, meaning 'king of astrologers', was said to have presented the vermilion powder to the Buddha. This orange or red powder is sometimes identified as cinnabar (Tib. *cog-la-ma*) or natural vermilion (Tib. *mtshal*), which are both forms of mercuric sulphide derived from naturally occurring mineral deposits. Mercury is extracted from cinnabar by a heating process, which separates it from its sulphur content. Recombining sulphur and mercury to produce crystalline cinnabar can chemically reverse this process. The transmutation of cinnabar into mercury and back into cinnabar revealed the mutability of the elements, and gave birth to both the Indian and Chinese traditions of alchemy.

In Sanskrit vermilion powder is known as *sindura*, and is identified as the mineral 'red lead' or minium, the red oxide of lead used as a pigment. The Tibetan materia medica identifies three forms of minium (Tib. *li-khri*): coarse minium from stones, soft minium from earth, and minium extracted from wood. A more general interpretation of the word *sindura* defines it as red lead, cinnabar, vermilion, or sacred ash.

Both cinnabar and minium have been used as mineral pigments since ancient times. In India *sindura* is the orange or red powder that is used to adorn sacred images,



The vermilion powder.

and for a variety of other religious purposes and rituals. Along with turmeric or yellow saffron (Skt. *kumkum*), red sandalwood (Skt. *chandana*), and white ash (Skt. *vibhuti*) made from burnt cow dung, *sindura* is used to apply the sacred marks or *tilaka* to the foreheads of devout Hindus. Traditionally a circular red dot or *tilaka* of *sindura* on the forehead of a married woman indicates that her husband is still alive and that she is not a widow. Such a mark provides an important visual statement in the social order of orthodox Hindu society. The marking of the forehead or other parts of the body dates back to the Vedic period, and elaborate systems of caste and sect marks have developed over the course of time. The marking or 'sealing' with a *tilaka* is one of the meanings of the Sanskrit term *mudra*.

Vermilion powder was certainly of great ritual significance during Buddha's time. Its red color symbolizes power, especially the magnetizing power of love and desire, personified as menstrual blood. In Vajrayana Buddhism the color red is assigned to certain subjugating and fertility goddesses, such as Red Kurukulla, Lakshmi, and Vasudhara. Vermilion powder is used in the creation of sand mandalas, and as a pigment in the decoration of many secular and religious artifacts. In Chinese symbolism vermilion and gold are regarded as the two harmonious colors of joy and prosperity.

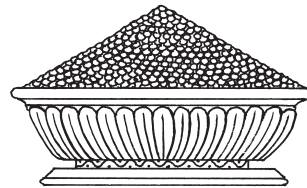
THE MUSTARD SEED

(Skt. *sarshapa*; Tib. *yungs-'bru*)

The wrathful form of Vajrapani, the Bodhisattva of power, was said to have offered mustard seed to the Buddha. Mustard seed was a common household commodity at the time of the Buddha, as illustrated by his parable of asking a distressed and recently

bereaved mother to obtain some mustard seed from a house in which no one had died. Every householder possessed mustard seed, but none had been spared the grief of bereavement, and as she listened to their harrowing stories the woman's own distress came to be alleviated.

Mustard seed was cultivated to produce oil for cooking and for fuelling oil lamps. It occurs in two varieties, white mustard (Tib. *yungs-dkar*), and black mustard (Tib. *yungs-nag*). In ancient India mustard seed was considered as a magical substance that could help counteract all hindrances and inauspicious turns of fate. This common belief is revealed in the Buddha's advice to the mother who wanted her baby to be brought back to life. Mustard seed was one of the sacrificial ingredients offered to Agni, the Vedic fire-god, during the sacred fire ritual or *homa*, where its function was to remove all inauspicious hindrances. In both the Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions it was considered to be a wrathful substance that could be used in destructive rites against all negativities, which arise in the form of obstructive demons. Mustard seed may be empowered with mantras of exorcism, and then burned or cast away to annihilate ghosts or malignant spirits. A certain form of spirit that possesses young children is known as a *sarshaparuna*, or 'red mustard' demon, referring perhaps to scarlet fever. Mustard seed is one of the main 'magical ingredients' (Tib. *thun*) used in ritual weapons against harmful



The mustard seed.

spirits during Vajrayana rituals of destructive activity. These weapons may take the form of a sacrificial ‘cake offering’ (Tib. *gtor-ma*), a skull cup, or an ox or yak horn engraved with the images of poisonous creatures, such as the snake, scorpion, and frog. Mustard seed is also used in Tibetan rituals of weather control, where hailstorms may be either conjured forth or prevented.

In his book *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, Nebesky-Wojkowitz describes a Tibetan magical weapon known as the ‘mill of Yama (Tib. *gShin-rje*)’, the ‘Lord of the Dead’, which was located at Khardo Gompa near Lhasa. This weapon took the form of a double millstone with powerful mantras in-

scribed upon its upper surface, whose function was to destroy the leaders of hostile political parties. The presiding lama appointed for this task would first catch the ‘life essence’ (Tib. *srog-snying*) of the enemy, and bind it into a few grains of white mustard seed, which would then be ground under the millstones with specific mantras. This process was evidently extremely dangerous, as people who handled the mill occasionally died soon afterwards.

The mustard seed offered by Vajrapani symbolizes the *Vajra* Buddha Family, which is presided over by Akshobya, whose activity is to destroy all hatred, aggression, and harmful influences.



THE FIVE ATTRIBUTES OF SENSORY ENJOYMENT



The ‘five desire qualities’ (Skt. *pancha-kamaguna*; Tib. *’dod-yon sna-nga*), or ‘offerings of the five senses’, form a group of the most beautiful objects which can attract or captivate the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These offerings traditionally take the form of: (1) a mirror for sight; (2) a lute, cymbals, or gongs for sound; (3) burning incense or a perfume-laden conch for smell; (4) fruit for taste; (5) a silk cloth for touch.

As attributes of the most delightful sensory pleasures they are mainly represented as offerings to the peaceful deities and lineage gurus. Here they symbolize the desire to please enlightened beings, and represent a gesture of sensual renunciation on the part of the donor. They are traditionally placed below the deity’s lotus seat or throne as a composite group in an offering bowl, but they may also be depicted as separate symbols, or held as offerings by the cloud-borne celestial gods. In many Buddhist rituals these five symbolic offerings are momentarily presented as an offering to the presiding lama.

Here they generally take the form of a mirror or small golden wheel, a pair of cymbals, incense or a conch shell, a tray of fresh fruit or sweets, and a piece of silk cloth. Small painted images of the five sense offerings, or any of the other groups of auspicious symbols, may be represented as rectangular miniature paintings (Tib. *tsak-li*), which are symbolically employed in many rituals. Butter sculptures, modeled in the most exquisite detail and colors, are also made of the five sense offerings, and various other offering groups, for specific rituals or festivals. The most impressive of these festivals was the *Monlam Chenmo* or ‘Great Prayer Festival’, held in Lhasa on the full moon of the first Tibetan month, when the capital’s various monasteries would compete to create the finest butter sculptures. Shaped like conical ‘ritual cake offerings’ (Tib. *gtor-ma*), these sculptures were often over ten feet in height and the product of many weeks of intensive work. The competition was held at night outside Lhasa’s main Jokhang Temple, and the Dalai Lama judged the winning image.



Various arrangements of the five sense offerings, with the mirror or wheel (form) at the center, and the offerings of sound (cymbals or lute), perfume (conch shell), fruit, and silk cloth. The smaller images depict the mirror, cymbals and gongs, the conch, fruit, flowers, and silk cloth.

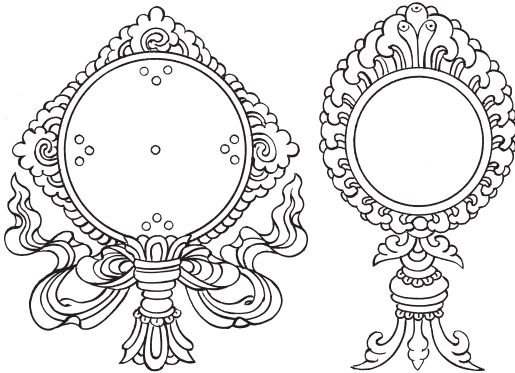
The five sensory offerings are related to the Five Buddhas as the faculties of the five aggregates and senses. Vairocana represents form (or consciousness) as the faculty of sight, symbolized by the mirror. Ratnasambhava represents feeling as the faculty of sound, symbolized by the lute or cymbals. Amitabha represents perception as the faculty of smell, symbolized by incense or a perfumed conch. Amoghasiddhi represents motivation or will as the faculty of taste, symbolized by fruit. Akshobhya represents consciousness (or form) as the faculty of touch, symbolized by the silk cloth.

In Vajrayana Buddhism these five sensual offerings are deified into a group of five offering goddesses, who bear the five objects of the senses as attributes.

SIGHT OR FORM

(Skt. *rupa*; Tib. *gzugs*)

A small silver mirror, or an eight-spoked golden wheel, represents the sense faculty of sight and the sense organ of the eye. The mirror represents form (or consciousness) and the element of space. It is clear, stainless, and bright, and reflects all phenomena



Mirrors.

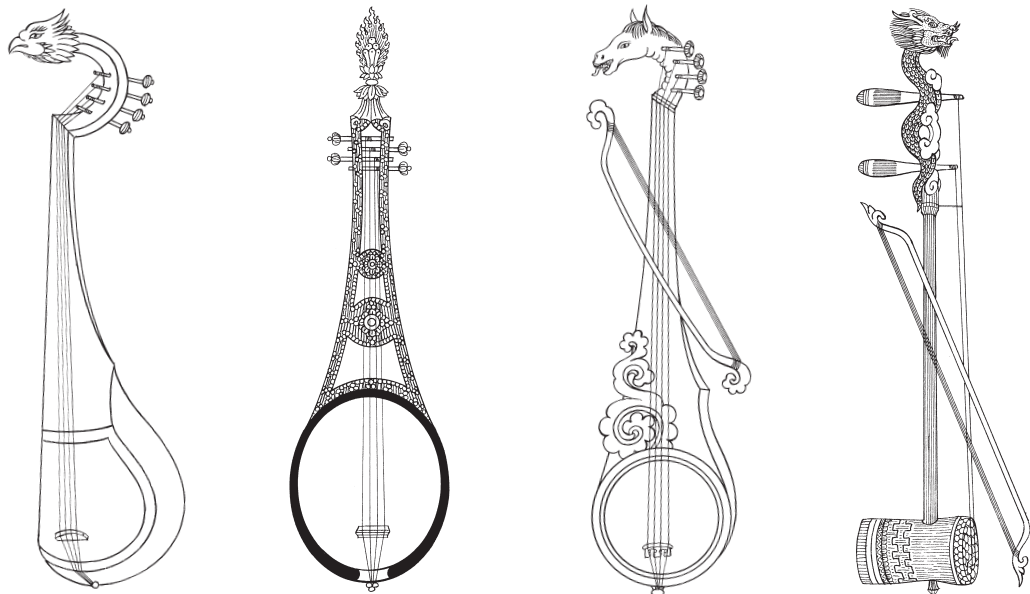
with impartiality. Whatever appearances arise as reflections, be they beautiful or ugly, inherently good or evil, the mirror passes no judgment on them. It remains completely unaffected, untarnished, and unchanged by the images that appear to arise in it. Similarly pure consciousness is unaffected by the beautiful or ugly, good, neutral, or evil nature of the thoughts which arise and pass within it. Like reflections in a mirror their essence is void, without substance, and yet they continue to manifest upon the 'screen' of consciousness or within the emptiness of the mirror. Like a wild animal that sees and attacks an apparent rival in its own reflection in a still pool, the unenlightened mind self-identifies with its own projected imagery. But the enlightened mind of a Buddha perceives all phenomena to be empty of self-nature, just as a desert dweller familiar with the appearance of mirages knows that they will never quench his thirst.

The white or silver disc of the mirror represents Vairocana, the 'Illuminator', and embodies his qualities, including those of: form or consciousness, the faculty of sight, the white element of water, and Vairocana's mirror-like or all-pervasive wisdom. Vairocana holds the attribute of an eight-spoked golden wheel or *dharmachakra*, and this wheel may replace the mirror as a specific symbol of form.

SOUND

(Skt. *shabda*; Tib. *sgra*)

A lute or a pair of cymbals most frequently represents the appreciation of music as the sense faculty of delightful sound, although occasionally a pair of gongs or a flute may be depicted. The lute (Skt. *vina*; Tib. *pi-wang*) is traditionally represented as a four or five stringed Central Asian or Chinese



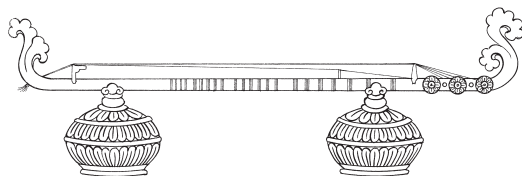
Four stringed Central Asian lute (left) in the form of a *rabab*, with a garuda head crowning its peg-box. Celestial lute of the gods (right), fashioned from precious woods, metals, and jewels.

Four-stringed Mongolian horse-head fiddle (left) with its horse-hair bow. Two-stringed Chinese fiddle (right) with a carved dragon peg-box and horse-hair bow.

lute (Ch. *ch'in*), with a pear-shaped body, a tapering and unfretted fingerboard, and a tuning-head or 'peg-box' fashioned into the shape of a mythological animal or bird. The lute is usually depicted resting behind the mirror at an inclined angle towards the left, much as it would be held when being played. The lute's upper edge may also appear straight, giving the instrument the appearance of the Afghan *rabab*. A hanging tassel, or a tied silk scarf, is also commonly depicted on the upper part of the instrument's neck.

On Mongolian *thangkas* the lute may take the form of the traditional horse-head fiddle, known in Mongolian as the *morin-khur* or *khil-khur*. This two-stringed bowed instrument has a rectangular sound box, and its peg-box is ornamented with the carved

neck and head of a horse. On Chinese-style *thangkas* the lute may take the form of the two-stringed Chinese fiddle, known in Chinese as the *er-hu* or *hu-ch'in*, and in Tibetan as the *ye*. This instrument has a small and deep cylindrical or hexagonal sound box, through the upper part of which runs its thin round wooden neck, which is crowned above its peg-box with a carved



Indian vina in the form of a *vichitra vina*, with two lower resonating gourds.

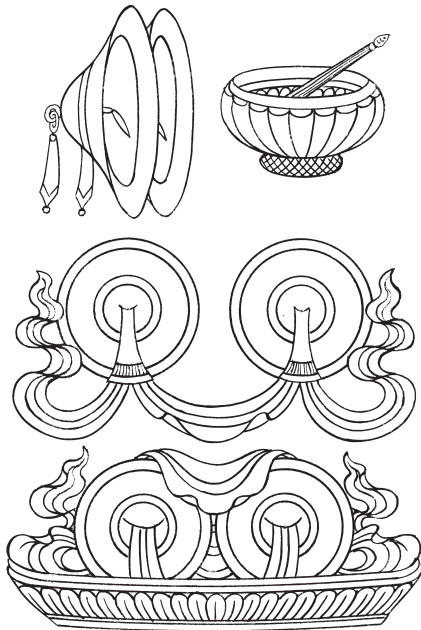
dragon. On Indian-style *thangkas* the lute may be shown in the form of the Indian *vi-chitra vina*, with two resonating gourds fastened beneath a long and tubular-sectioned wooden or bamboo neck.

When two golden cymbals are depicted to represent the faculty of sound, they are commonly depicted in a symmetrical arrangement at the front center of the offering bowl, with a draped silk ribbon looped between their central handles. These cymbals may take the form of the small Tibetan hand cymbals (Tib. *ting-shag*), made of bell metal, which are about three inches in diameter and produce a sustained high-pitched ring. But they more commonly take the form of the large bronze cymbals, which are used in monastic rituals and produce a clashing sound. As a sense offering to the peaceful

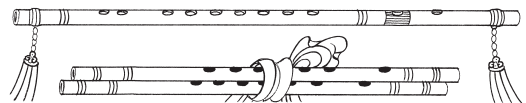
deities, these monastic cymbals appear in the form of the flat cymbals (Tib. *zil-snyan*) used in peaceful rites, rather than the domed cymbals (Tib. *rol-mo*) used in wrathful rites.

When gongs are depicted they are represented as a pair of symmetrical bell metal bowls, with two wooden striking sticks placed within them, and cloth rings underneath their bases to sustain their resonance when struck. The Chinese gong (Ch. *lo*), and the Mongolian gong (Mon. *dudaram*), were probably the prototypes of these symbols, which began to appear in later Tibetan art. In the modern mythology of the New Age spiritual movement these gongs have come to be known as ‘Tibetan singing bowls’, and many fantastic tales of occult power have been grafted onto their recent history and innovative techniques of playing. Brass or bronze bowls first began to appear on Tibetan refugee stalls during the 1970’s, but these objects were actually the eating or offering bowls of these impoverished refugees. Over the last few decades these Tibetan singing bowls have been widely manufactured for the tourist markets of India and Nepal, but stories of their employment in ancient Tibet as mystical musical instruments are a modern myth.

When a flute is depicted it generally takes the form of the Indian bamboo flute, or the long transverse Chinese flute or *ti*. The *ti* is fashioned from bamboo, with six or seven finger holes and two mouth holes. When this flute is played a thin bamboo membrane covers one of the lower mouth holes, which



Pair of ritual bronze cymbals (top left); bowl gong with wooden striker (top right). Below are two pairs of Tibetan cymbals joined together with silk cloth as an offering.



Chinese flute (*ti*) with bamboo membrane (top); pair of Indian flutes tied with silk (bottom).

creates the characteristic nasal or kazoo-like tone of the Chinese flute. The flute is generally positioned at an inclined angle behind the mirror, and usually has a silk tassel hanging from its upper end.

SMELL

(Skt. *gandha*; Tib. *dri*)

Smoldering incense sticks, an incense burner, or a conch shell full of perfume, traditionally represent the faculty of smell. The basic ingredient of Tibetan incense (Tib. *bsang*) is powdered juniper leaf, which is burned in charcoal braziers or clay incense burners. Tibetan stick incense (Tib. *spos*) is hand-rolled from a paste of juniper powder mixed to various formulas with medicinal herbs, saffron, sandalwood, frankincense, aloes, musk, and other fragrant substances. Several upright incense sticks, or a thick round cluster of sticks

bound together with a yellow cotton thread, may be depicted smoldering within a grain-filled bowl or 'granary' box. Powdered juniper or *bsang* is traditionally shown smoldering in incense burners (Tib. *spos-phor*), which are commonly depicted in the form of bronze vase-shaped vessels that stand upon three small legs. These incense burners can be ornately decorated, and may have carrying handles or be suspended upon three chains in the fashion of a swung Christian censer. In Tibet large incense burners (Tib. *bsang khung*), for burning juniper leaves and branches, are traditionally constructed upon rooftops or near the entrances to temples and monasteries. These outdoor incense burners are made of whitewashed clay and fashioned in the shape of *stupas*. For indoor use a wooden incense box would be more commonly used. This rectangular box has a lower metal tray, upon which incense sticks are burned horizontally on a bed of ashes. In



Four conch shells full of swirling perfumed liquids (top row). Various examples of burning incense with tripod mounted censers (left); a wooden incense box with stick incense burning above, and a large outdoor incense burner (right).

ancient India incense was generally burned in the form of *dhup*, which was mixed as a malleable and waxy paste from flower and wood essences.

In India a conch shell mounted upon a small tripod serves as the water oblation vessel in *pujas* or rituals, and this vessel is known as a *shankhapatra* or conch-bowl. As a Buddhist oblation or offering vessel the conch is traditionally filled with saffron-scented water, or water perfumed with the five fragrant substances of saffron, sandalwood, musk, camphor, and nutmeg. Rosewater, and aloe and *champak* flower essences are also used in India as liquids for ‘conch perfume’ (Skt. *shankhanakha*). As with many medicinal substances or herbs used in Tibetan tantric rituals, a virgin or pre-adolescent child should pick the herbs and collect the water from a natural source.

Iconographically the conch shell full of perfume is usually placed on the far right or

left of the offering bowl, and balanced with the fruit offering on the opposite side. The white conch shell is depicted horizontally, with its spiraling mouth commonly opening to the right. Its perfumed water is shown as a ‘swirling offering’ of a pale blue liquid with white waves crests, symbolizing the active essence or permeating fragrance of the perfume.

TASTE

(Skt. *rasa*; Tib. *ro*)

Fresh fruit is traditionally represented as the delicious offering of taste, and frequently a triangular formation of three round fruits will be depicted at the left or right side of the offering bowl. These three fruits, which may branch from a single stem with leaves, represent the trinities of the Three Jewels (Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*), the Buddhas of the



Various examples of food and fruit offerings, including guavas, bananas, citrons, plums, strawberries, and sugar cane. To the left of center is a bowl of sweets; to the right of center are three ritual cake offerings or tormas.

three times (past, present, and future), or the Chinese symbol of the ‘fruits of the tree of plenty’ (abundance, maturity, and ripeness). These three fruits are often depicted in the form of peaches, but they may also be represented as apples, apricots, mangoes, oranges, persimmons, guavas, pomegranates, lemons, limes, or *bilva* fruits. The pomegranate, with its bright red skin and edible seeds, is a symbol of happiness, passion, abundance, and fertility. The peach is a symbol of longevity and immortality, and the citron is a symbol of wealth and prosperity. In Chinese symbolism these three fruits – pomegranate, peach, and citron – are known as the ‘three fruits of blessings’, and represent happiness, longevity, and wealth. Occasionally a variety of different fruits may be depicted within the offering bowl, or the taste offering may take the form of a ritual cake or *torma* (Tib. *gtorma*). However, *tormas*, which are hand-molded from barley flour dough, are more specifically presented as food offerings to the wrathful deities.

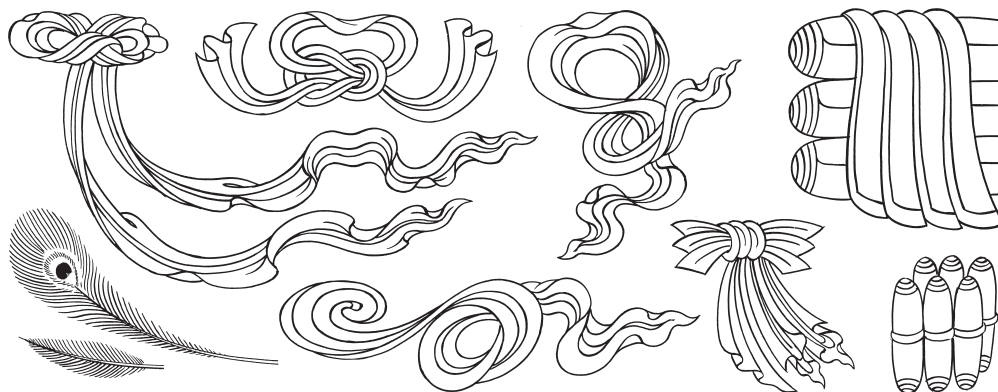
The Sanskrit term for taste, *rasa*, has a wide variety of subtle meanings. In general it refers to the faculty of taste as juice, sap, essence, or flavor, but on a more esoteric

level it refers to the creative juice of spiritual or artistic inspiration, particularly in the fields of music, drama, and dance. The dancing postures and facial expressions of many of the main Buddhist *yidam* deities are described as exhibiting the ‘nine *rasas* or dramatic sentiments’ (Skt. *navanathyarasa*). These are the nine characteristic modes of expression that are displayed in Indian dance and drama. In tantric literature the term *rasa* is also used as a synonym for semen and mercury. Six kinds of taste are described in the Ayurvedic tradition: sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent. In Vajrayana Buddhism these six tastes are assigned to the wisdom qualities of the Five Buddha Families and Vajradhara, as the sixth or primordial Adibuddha.

TOUCH

(Skt. *sparsaha*; Tib. *reg-bya*)

A colored silk ribbon invariably represents the faculty of touch, as the soft smoothness of silk is perceived as the most sensually pleasing and unrestrictive of all fabrics. Indian silk merchants often demonstrate the

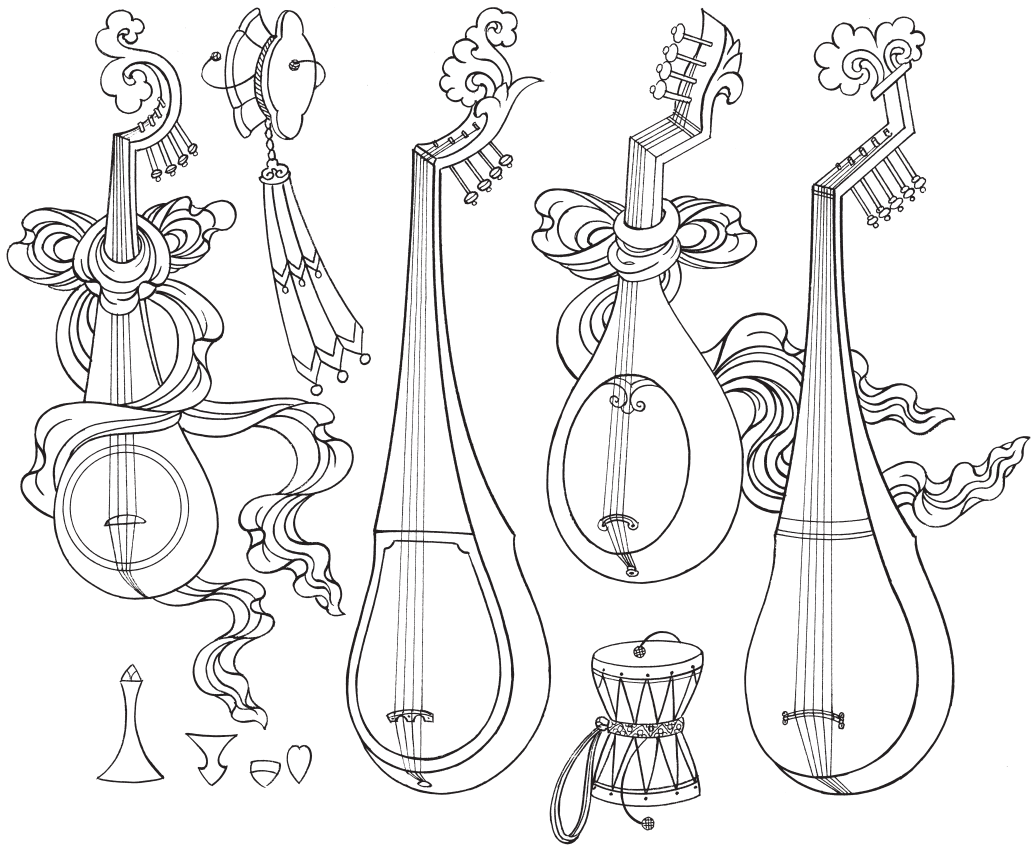


Various examples of silk ribbons, feathers (lower left), and rolls of silk (right).

fineness of their silks by passing the width of a bolt of silk through a finger ring. However, the gossamer thread of the divine silks of the gods is described as being so fine that a square of this divine silk, large enough to cover Mt Meru, can be drawn beneath a fingernail. This divine silk is so light and subtle that it appears as if to float upon a heavenly breeze, with its edges and ends making the most graceful folds and twisting curves.

The silk offering ribbon may be knotted around the base of the mirror or wheel, with its two ends twisting upwards on either side of the offering bowl. It may pass through the

central bosses of the pair of cymbals and then extend outwards on either side. It may be knotted around the neck of the lute. It may also drape over the central lip of the offering bowl and then swirl upwards at either side. The silk offering may be colored in one of the five rainbow colors: white, yellow, red, green, and blue, which correspond to the five elements and the Five Buddhas, or the particular Buddha Family to which the deity belongs. A multicolored and tied bundle of silk, a group of silk bolts, or a cluster of bird feathers may also be illustrated to depict the faculty of touch.



The remaining chapters are available in the full edition of
The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols by Robert Beer.