

Universal Metaphysical Symbols and their Role in Cross-Cultural Inspiration

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Introduction

Each and every day, we are exposed to countless images, icons, and symbols. In a consumerist society, change is often manifest in new merchandise being sold and new promotional imagery to advertise it. Often, this happens as fast as products can be invented and marketed. Many of the symbols are in themselves disposable and empty of meaning. Yet some symbols have meaning that has endured through change and through centuries, meaning that is felt across cultures of the world. We call these metaphysical symbols, because they seem to derive their meaning from a realm that is larger than that of the universe to which we consciously relate.

Religious historian Mircea Eliade designated these symbols as religious symbols, using the term *religious* to reflect its Latin root, *religare*, meaning to bind, to connect man to a higher concept or experience. Eliade described these symbols, saying “An essential characteristic of [a] religious symbol is its multivalence, its capacity to express simultaneously several meanings, the unity between which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.”¹

In this paper, I present the eight auspicious symbols of Tibet — the parasol, the pair of golden fish, the treasure vase, the lotus flower, the right spiraling conch, the endless knot, the victory banner, and the golden wheel — using Eliade’s idea of “multivalence of meanings” as the structure of a case study.

Grateful acknowledgement is made for use of the artwork and photographs in this paper. The line drawings of each of the eight auspicious symbols that are set forth in the margins and in the concluding table are all from Robert Beer’s *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. The source for each photograph is indicated and included in the bibliography.

Symbols and Universal Metaphysical Symbols

The word *symbol* is widely used — and with different meanings according to its contexts. The word originates from the Greek, *sym*, meaning together and *ballein*, meaning to throw; hence, to throw together. Webster's dictionary defines the word *symbol* as something that stands for, represents or suggests another thing; an object used to represent something abstract; an emblem.² This definition embraces the symbols of graphic design and mathematics as well as the symbols used in language, psychology, and semiology.

The symbols in this research are comprised within the definitions mentioned above — and they go a step further. These symbols are unique in that they refer to an essential truth. They reveal the ultimate cosmic reality, transcending space and time, and are therefore called universal metaphysical symbols. The terminology is important to establish since many scholars have written about these symbols, each one defining them in a different way. For example, in addition to using the word *religious*, Eliade used the word *hierophany* as a physical manifestation of the sacred.³

Eliade is not alone in carefully defining his terms. The French philosopher Rene Guenon, one of the pillars of the traditionalist school, named his book on symbols *Symbols of Sacred Science*.⁴

In essence, the concepts behind these symbols are consistent: they are manifestations of the sacred that connects us to ultimate structures of realities of man and cosmos.

Definition of the Problem

The main question of this research is two-fold:

Are there symbols that are able to transcend time and space, making their meanings metaphysical and universal? If so, what characteristics make them acquire these qualities?

The focus in this paper is the eight auspicious symbols of Tibet, each of which is highly connected to the Tibetan religious beliefs. Yet are they universal symbols?

To start answering these questions, especially to enquire about their universality, an analysis was formulated to examine these symbols purely based upon shape, function, and natural habitat. The goal was to extract them from all cultural, religious, mythological, or ritualistic interpretations and to examine them in their purest form.

Research Structure

A research structure was formulated to enable an equal analysis of all of the eight symbols, covering background, symbolic meaning, and meaning across cultures.

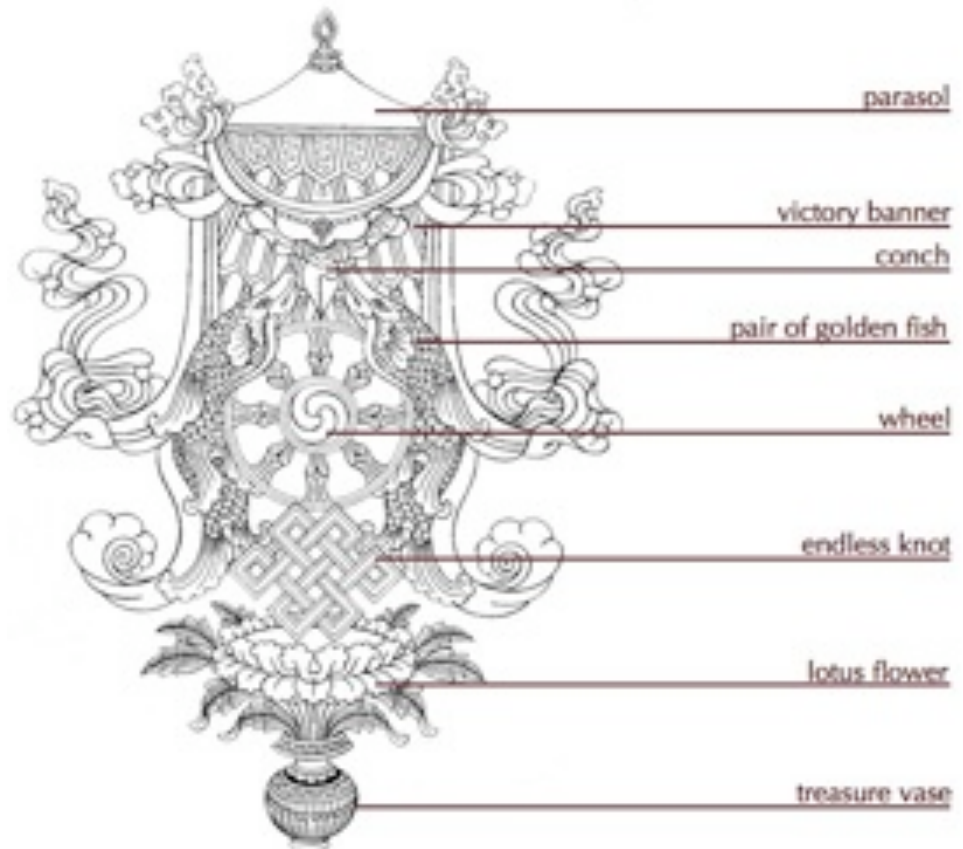
Background. Some of these symbols are very engrained in their cultural and religious backgrounds. A brief introductory section provides a narrative description, supplemented with illustrations of each symbol in turn.

Symbolic Meaning. A section on symbolic meaning explores each symbol purely in relation to shape, function, and natural habitat. This section also provides a synthesis of the symbol, presenting each symbol's ultimate meanings in key words and listing the meanings connected with them.

The Meaning of the Symbol Across Cultures. A detailed, narrative explanation of the meaning of the symbol according to the Tibetan religious point of view is provided in this section. This is supplemented with a table that describes how the symbol is interpreted and a sampling of the geographic range where the symbol is comprehended. Unless otherwise indicated, the information provided in these tables was extracted from *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, by J. C. Cooper.⁵

Conclusion. In the concluding section, the symbolic meanings and the synthesis of meaning in other cultures are presented, along with reflections on the results.

The Eight Auspicious Symbols
Tibetan: *bkra shis rtags brgyad*
Sanskrit: *ashtamangala*



The Eight Auspicious Symbols

The eight auspicious symbols of Tibet are:

- the parasol
- the pair of golden fish
- the treasure vase
- the lotus flower
- the right spiraling conch
- the endless knot
- the victory banner
- the golden wheel

This group of symbols is found in many variations in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. These symbols of royalty originated in India and were presented at such ceremonies as the coronation of a king.

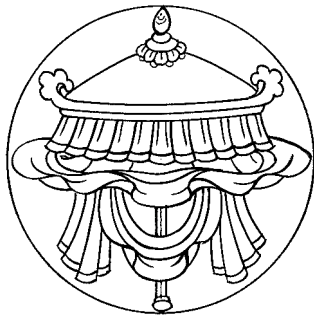


Dying Buddha and parasol, Tankha, late 19th – early 20th century
From *The Buddha*

In Buddhism, the eight auspicious symbols represent the offerings presented by gods to Shakyamuni the Buddha after his enlightenment. Legend says that Brahma, the great god of the form realm, was the first to appear with a thousand-spoke wheel, as a request to turn the wheel of Dharma. Indra, the sky god, appeared next with a right spiraling conch for the proclamation of the Dharma. The earth god, Sthavara, gave Shakyamuni the Buddha a golden vase full of the elixir of immortality.⁶

In Tibetan Buddhism, the eight auspicious symbols correspond with parts of the body and the being of the Buddha. The parasol is the head; the pair of golden fishes, his eyes; the lotus flower represents his tongue; the treasure vase, his neck; the wheel, his feet; the victory banner, his body; the conch, his speech; and the endless knot, his mind.⁷

While one could view the symbols in order from head to foot, here we present them in the traditional order, as used by Loden Sherap Dagyab Rinpoche.⁸



The Parasol
Tibetan: *gdug*
Sanskrit: *chatra*

The Parasol

The Tibetan parasol is covered with silk in white, yellow or multi-color. One or more layers of frills fall around it from its rim. Its diameter is large enough to shade up to four people from the sun.

In ancient India, the parasol was a symbol of secular and social status. Used to protect royalty from the heat of the sun, it was an object of luxury, demonstrated by the fact that an important person would usually be shaded by servants carrying parasols. In Europe, the parasol was also a symbol of status.

Symbolic Meaning of the Parasol

The symbolic meaning of the parasol is derived from its function as protection from the elements. The meaning of the parasol can also be quite direct and symbolize protection both in the physical and in the spiritual plane.

Aspects of the shape of the parasol — the dome, the rim, and the pole — provide additional significance, as we discuss next.

The Dome. The top part of the parasol has the shape of a dome. The dome is a universal symbol of heavens or the image of the universe.⁹

The Rim or Solar Wheel. When viewed from above, the structure of the parasol describes a wheel with a central hub and its rim; these can be seen as the image of the sun irradiating light rays through the parasol spokes. The wheel as representation of the sun is associated with the symbolism of the center, as the sun is the center of the universe. It also represents the dualism between the still hub (the sun) and the eternal movement of the rim (the planets in its orbit).

The Pole or Axis Mundi. The pole of the parasol represents the axis mundi: the connection point between heaven and earth. It is the center point of space and time. This concept of axis mundi appears in most cultures; it is represented, for example, as the tree of life, the cosmic mountain, or the cosmic pillars.¹⁰

Synthesis of the Parasol
<u>Dome</u>
Heavens
Image of the World
<u>Solar Wheel</u>
Sun
Center
Cycles of Time
<u>Axis Mundi</u>
Tree of Life, Cosmic Mountain,
Cosmic Pillar
Male Principle
Connection between earth and
heavens

The Meaning of the Parasol Across Cultures

In Tibetan Buddhism, the parasol was transformed into a spiritual symbol. The shade of the parasol symbolizes the protection from the heat of defilements; that is to say, suffering, desire, and harmful forces. The eight spokes of the parasol symbolize the noble eightfold path of Buddhism: right understanding, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. A round, yellow parasol is often suspended from the ceiling of Tibetan monasteries over the throne of the monk. The parasol thus provides a ritual function to similar to that of a canopy in Christian churches.

The meaning ascribed to the parasol in a few cultures is shown in the following chart:

Culture	Meaning of Parasol
Chinese	High Rank Protection Good Luck
European	Status The umbracullum is a symbol of the Roman Catholic Church, a piece of the papal regalia and insignia
Hindu	Protection Royal Dignity Universal Spiritual Ruler
Tibetan	Protection Royalty Honor

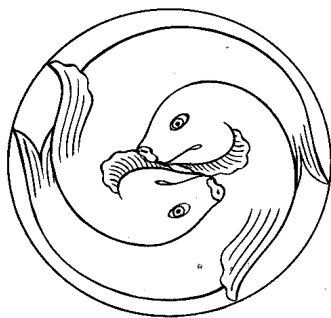
Conclusion

The meaning of the parasol as a device of protection either on the material or spiritual plane is quite direct. As a symbol of royal dignity and high rank, it could not have a better design. The shape of the parasol is the combination of the axis mundi which marks the center, the place of connection of earth and heavens; a solar wheel, with the sun at the center; and finally, the dome as representation of the heavens.

The Pair of Golden Fish

This symbol is constituted of two fish, facing each other, standing parallel or slightly crossed. The pair of golden fish is an auspicious symbol in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions.

The pair of golden fish is a pre-Buddhist symbol, representing the most sacred rivers in India: the Ganges and the Yamuna Rivers. As Robert Beer indicates, "Symbolically, these two rivers represent the lunar and solar channels, which originate in the nostrils and carry the alternating rhythms of breath or prana."¹¹



The Pair of Golden Fish
 Tibetan: *gser-nya*
 Sanskrit: *suvanamatya*



Pair of fish from Kalachakra sand mandala
 Barry Bryant, *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala*

Synthesis of the Pair of Golden Fish

Water Element

All Potentiality
 Fertility
 Womb
 Resurrection
 Immortality

Number Two

Dualism
 Opposites

Gold

Sun
 Divine Light
 Wealth

Symbolic Meaning of the Pair of Golden Fish

The meaning of the pair of golden fish is mostly related the water element, the habitat of fish; fertility, due to the fish's capability of producing many eggs at one time; the number two; and the color gold.

Water Element. Jean Chevalier and Alan Gheerbrant classify the very complex symbolism of water in three main concepts: it is source of life, media for purification, and center of regeneration.¹² In fact, there is no life without water. Particularly for fish, the water element emphasizes its meaning as source of life. Water is no less important for those on land. The blood in our veins, the semen, the milk, the sap of plants, and the rain are all in liquid forms; they are all vehicles of life and fertility.

Fertility. The fish represent fertility and abundance due to their ability to spawn many eggs at a time and their consequent rapid reproduction.

Number Two. The most important characteristic of the number two is the division of unity into duality. The number two symbolizes all dualistic principles: for example, black and white, man and woman, day and night. In terms of universal manifestation, the number two represents essence and substance.

Gold. The color of the sun, the most precious of all metals, and representation of divine light and wealth are all gold.

The Meaning of the Pair of Golden Fish Across Cultures

In Tibetan Buddhism, the pair of golden fish represent fertility, fearlessness, freedom, spontaneity, and happiness, because these fish have complete freedom in the water.

The meaning ascribed to the fish in various cultures is shown below:

Culture	Meaning of Fish
<i>Chinese</i>	Harmony, wealth, the word 'yu' is the homophone of fish and great wealth
<i>Egyptian</i>	Phallus of Osiris, two fish represent the creative principle of the Nile
<i>Arabic</i>	Fertility
<i>Indo-European</i>	Fertility and wisdom
<i>Early Christianity</i>	Jesus, "the fisher of man"
<i>Christian</i>	Immortality, resurrection
<i>Latin Christianity</i>	Jesus himself Fish is eaten on Fridays Early cult of Isis, Venus and Ishtar or Astarte for their fertility
<i>Greek</i>	Attribute of Aphrodite as love and fecundity and Poseidon as power of waters
<i>Hebrew</i>	Symbol of heavenly banquet in Paradise
<i>Hindu</i>	Wealth and fertility, attribute of divinities of love Vehicle of Varuna, god of the waters, the oceans, and the rivers. He controls human being's fate, guardian of immortality.

<i>Culture</i>	Meaning of Fish
<i>Japanese</i>	The word for love is homophone of carp
<i>Roman</i>	Emblem of Venus as love and fertility, Neptune as the powers of waters
<i>Syria, Phoenicia, and Phrygia</i>	Eucharist food of priests, emblem of divinities of love and good fortune
<i>Tibetan</i>	Fertility, harmony, fearlessness, spontaneity

Conclusion

The meaning of the pair of golden fish encompasses a wide range, covering the water element, the number two, and the color of gold. The meaning of fearless and spontaneous might be restricted to Tibetan culture. As a general rule, the meaning of fish is directly related to their capacity of reproduction and as a source of food. In many cultures, the meaning of fish overlaps with the meaning of its source: the water itself. The water is sacred as a representation of immortality and resurrection.



Tibetan ritual vase
Martin Brauen, *The Mandala Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism*



The Treasure Vase
 Tibetan: *gter-chen-poi*
bum-pa
 Sanskrit: *nidhana kumbha*

The Treasure Vase

The treasure vase is a fat-bellied vessel with a short neck. The use of vessels like the treasure vase dates back to the ancient times. The typical Tibetan treasure vase is ornate with lotus flower motifs and shaped in the fashion of the traditional Indian clay pot, Kumbha. Sadhus (monks) carry the Kumbha, or water pot, as a symbol of renunciation.¹³

Symbolic Meaning of the Treasure Vase

The symbolic meaning of the treasure vase is related to a womb containing primeval waters of creation; it is the holder or the source of inexhaustible material and spiritual wealth. Its meaning is thus derived from its function as a container or womb of the source of life and the water element contained in it.

The water in the treasure vase is comparable to the amniotic liquid in the womb, containing all potentiality of life. It is also a treasure in itself as the elixir of immortality, regeneration, and resurrection. The womb here represents the un-manifested, the possibilities of all.

Synthesis of the Treasure Vase

Water Element

Formless, pre-creation
 All Potentiality
 Fertility
 Resurrection
 Elixir of Immortality
 Cleansing
 Purity

Womb

Un-manifested
 All Potentiality

The Meaning of the Treasure Vase Across Cultures

In Tibetan Buddhism, the treasure vase symbolizes long life, prosperity, and wealth. Treasure vases play an important role in rituals in Tibetan Buddhism, creating a welcoming environment for deities.

The meaning ascribed to the treasure vase in a few cultures is shown below:

Culture	Meaning of Treasure Vase
<i>Alchemy</i>	Place where miracles occur
<i>Celtic</i>	Holds healing waters
<i>Chinese</i>	Vase holding the waters of life is attribute of Kwan-yin
<i>Christian</i>	Vases like the grail are the repositories of treasure
<i>Egyptian</i>	Heart, waters, matrix, emblem of Osiris and Isis
<i>Graeco-Roman</i>	Fertility and wisdom
<i>Hindu</i>	Holds Amrita, the elixir of immortality
<i>Tibetan</i>	Welcoming place for deities

Conclusion

The synthesis of the treasure vase is the sum of womb and water. In this case, the meaning of both overlap as un-manifest and all potentiality. Un-manifest and all potentiality are also the basis of the meaning for vase found in most of the cultures above. The association of vase and water and the womb and amniotic waters seems to be common in both Eastern and Western cultures.



*Lotus supporting a monk as symbol of the Sangha, Tankha, 19th century
From The Buddha*

Lotus Flower

The lotus flower has fascinated humanity since antiquity by virtue of its unique characteristics. Most of the meaning of the lotus flower as a symbol is related to its botanical characteristics. The photosensitive flower is one of the lotus's most striking qualities. The flower is strongly related to the sun and its temporal attributes since the sun is the commander of the length of days and nights and the cycles of nature.

Beyond its photosensitive nature, other qualities make the lotus flower unique. Few other plants have as long a stem as the lotus. The leaves are also quite large. Curiously, the lotus bears buds, flowers, and seeds at the same time. Because it grows in an aquatic habitat, this flower is strongly associated with the water element and fertility. The lotus flower grows from the mud and rises from the water to the surface. For these reasons, it is associated with the process of spiritual unfolding, enlightenment, and purity. The lotus flower's equivalent in Western iconography as a mystical flower is the rose.

Symbolic Meaning of the Lotus Flower

Although the meaning of the lotus flower is manifold, its meaning is mostly related to the temporal aspects regarding to cycles of the sun and the fertile attributes of the water element.

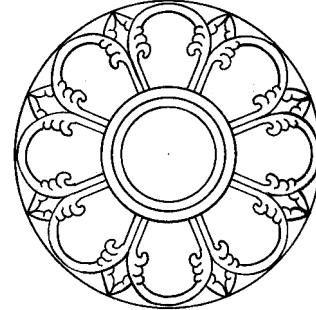
Sun Symbolism. The sun is the source of light and of heat, the essential energy for life. In addition to providing light and heat, the sun is essentially a symbol of center, as the center of the universe. The concepts of immortality and resurrection are attributed to the lotus flower because of its connection to the sun and its never-ending cycles of day and night and changing seasons.

Water Element. The habitat of the lotus flower is the water. As with the auspicious symbol of the pair of golden fish, the water represents fertility and the source of life. The lotus flower, however, provides a stronger symbolism of a representation of the manifested world from the unmanifested world symbolized by the waters.

Opposite Powers. The lotus flower is strongly related to the light and therefore considered as a sun symbol. At the same time, it rises from the water. This duality — the sun and the water — also brings to mind the duality of sun and the moon and that of fire and water. Consequently it is a symbol of the duality of all things.

Axis Mundi. The stem of the lotus flower is seen as the world axis supporting the flower of the lotus throne, the spiritual summit.

Number Eight. In Tibet, the lotus flower is often depicted with eight petals and is therefore associated with the number eight. The number eight is universally the number of cosmic harmony, for the four cardinal directions and their intermediates.



The Lotus Flower
Tibetan: *padma*
Sanskrit: *padma*

Synthesis of the Lotus Flower
<u>Sun</u>
Fire Element
Regeneration
Resurrection
Cycles of Time
Center
Male Principle
<u>Water Element</u>
Formless
All Potentiality
Fertility
Resurrection
Immortality
Cleansing
Purity
Female Principle

The Meaning of the Lotus Flower Across Cultures

In Tibetan Buddhism, the lotus flower is one of the most sacred symbols, the symbol of purity, divine origination, perfection, renunciation, and compassion. These meanings are reflected in other cultures, as shown below:

<i>Culture</i>	Meaning of Lotus Flower
<i>Buddhist</i>	Primordial waters, manifested world, unfolding wisdom, the stem is the axis mundi
<i>Chinese</i>	Purity, feminine principle
<i>Egyptian</i>	Creation, fecundity, rebirth, immortality
<i>Graeco-Roman</i>	Emblem of Aphrodite/ Venus

Culture	Meaning of Lotus Flower
<i>Hindu</i>	Procreative power of the eternal substance, solar matrix, regeneration, unfolding of all possibilities, purity, beauty, longevity, chakras of the body are depicted as lotus flowers
<i>Mayan</i>	Manifested universe
<i>Sumerosemitic</i>	Creative, generative powers, resurrection, immortality
<i>Taoist</i>	Golden flower, cosmic wheel of manifestation, spiritual unfolding
<i>Tibetan</i>	Purity, divine origination

The Meaning of the Rose Across Cultures

Many of the meanings of the lotus are represented by the rose in other cultures as well.

Culture	Meaning of Rose
<i>Alchemical</i>	Rebirth of spiritual after death of temporal
<i>Christian</i>	Flower of paradise, mystic rose
<i>Egyptian</i>	Sacred to Isis as symbol of pure spiritual love
<i>Hebrew</i>	Center of the rose is the sun and the petals are the infinite, the rose emanates from the tree of life.

Culture	Meaning of Rose
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<i>Rosicrucian</i>	The Rose-cross is the Mystic Rose as wheel and cross, the rose is the divine light and the cross is the temporal world of pain. The rose grows on the tree of life.
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Conclusion

Although the lotus flower and the rose do not share the water element in their symbolism, both are mystical flowers growing on an axis. The rose in the tree of life and the lotus on its own stem can be seen as growing on an axis mundi. The meaning of this transcendental flower is not the same in East and West, but one might say they are comparable to each other.

There seems to be a concept intrinsic to the lotus and the rose that gives them a transcendental quality. This may be related to the beauty of the flowers themselves and the mechanism of the blossoming of the flowers. The lotus flower blossoms in response to the light as a symbol of the blossoming of the heart and ultimately of the spirit. Similarly, it is perhaps no coincidence that the rose is considered as a token of love in many cultures.

The Right Turning Conch Shell

(Tibetan: dung g.yas-khyil, Sanskrit: daksinavartasankha)

The conch shell used in Tibetan rituals is a large, oval, spiraled shell with pointed ends. The right spiraling conch (the shell turns clockwise from the center) is considered to have creative principles, while the left spiraling conch (which turns counterclockwise from the center) is considered to have destructive ones.

Because the conch is an element from nature, it has appeared as an artifact in many different cultures since olden times. The right turning conch shell is used in Tibetan Buddhism as a horn and as a container in religious rituals.



Horn made of conch
Philip Rawson, *Sacred Tibet*

For its use as a horn, the tip of the conch is cut off and the cut end is blown into.

Symbolic Meaning of the Right Turning Conch Shell

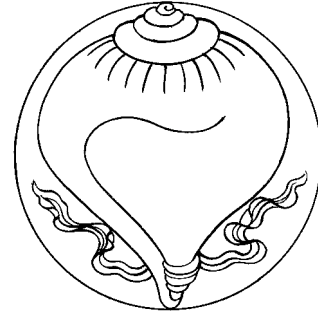
The meaning of the right turning conch shell is related to the primeval waters and the movement indicated by its spiral shape.

Water Element. The conch is strongly and obviously related with water where it originated, and shares the water's symbolic meanings as discussed in the section on the pair of golden fish.

Spiral Movement. The spiral is a natural shape and intrinsic movement of nature. It can be found in the spiraling buds of plants, in the horns of several animals; it is the shape of many conches. It is also the movement of the air in tornadoes and hurricanes; it is the movement of the waters in the sea. It is the movement of our planet earth and the moon in the galaxy.

In the human body, the most essential information of our own selves, our DNA, shapes itself in a helicoidal form. The cowlicks on our heads grow in a spiral shape. The muscle of the heart is a helicoidal shape, so that the blood of our veins is pumped in a spiral movement. Even fingerprint whorls, a pattern unique to each individual, are in the form of spirals.

The spiral describes a movement from a fixed point outward expanding to the infinite. It represents the power of the sun, the moon, the air, the waters, the rolling thunder, and lightning. Expansion and contraction, growth and decrease, winding and unwinding, birth and death are some of the principles related to this symbol. The spiral shares the symbolism of the labyrinth, as a search to reach the center.



The Right-Turning
Conch Shell
Tibetan: *dung g.yas-khyil*
Sanskrit:
daksinavartasankha

Synthesis of the Right-Spiraling Conch

Water Element

All Potentiality
Fertility
Resurrection
Immortality

Spiral Shape and Movement

Movement of the sun, moon, whirl of air,
thunder and storm, movement of waters
Expansion / Contraction
Immortality

The Meaning of the Conch Across Cultures

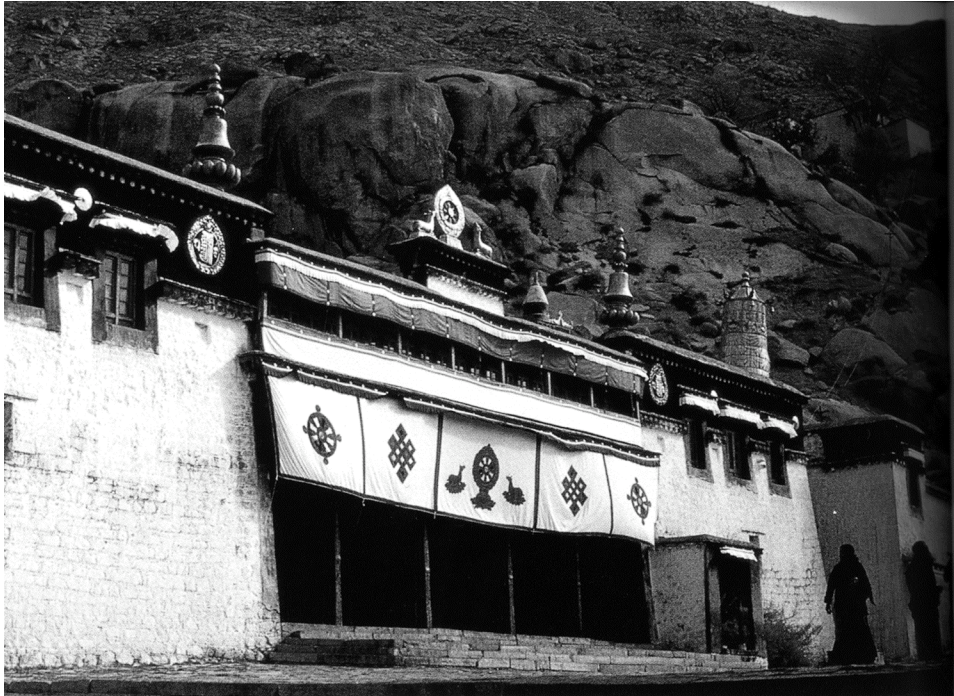
In Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that the sound of the right spiraling conch horn represents the Buddhist teachings, “the beautiful sound of Dharma,” and the wish for it to spread and grow in all directions. It is believed that the sound of the right spiraling conch will tune with the movements of the sun, the moon, the planets, and stars in the universe.¹⁴

The meaning ascribed to the conch in a few cultures is shown below:

<i>Culture</i>	<i>Meaning of Conch</i>
<i>Aztec</i>	Manuscripts depict a priest blowing a conch in procession of flower and food gods.
<i>Buddhist</i>	Voice of Buddha
<i>Chinese</i>	Royalty
<i>Graeco-Roman</i>	Triton blows conch shells while drawing the chariots of Poseidon.
<i>Hindu</i>	Primordial sound of creation OM. Conch was blown at fertility rituals. ¹⁵
<i>Siam</i>	Used in agricultural fertility rituals. ¹⁶
<i>Tibetan</i>	Teachings of Buddha

Conclusion

The synthesis of the meaning of the conch is the combination of the spiral shape/movement and the water element. The meaning of fertility and immortality has been adopted in many cultures, as we can see in the previous chart. The conch can be interpreted as a form or mold giving its spiral shape or movement to anything that passes through it. When it is used as a horn, it gives the air that passes through the spiral shape a movement, making it turn into a primordial sound that connects to all natural movements of nature.



Endless knot displayed in front of monastery
Robert E. Fisher, *Art of Tibet*

The Endless Knot

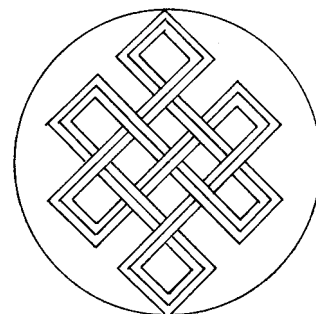
The eternal knot, a knot with no beginning or end, is a graphic ornament symbolizing eternity.

Symbolic Meaning of the Endless Knot

The name “endless knot” is interpreted as an interconnected network of knots. The meaning of the knot is mainly related to the act of binding. In general, the meaning of the knot is to attach or tie. For example, this connection could be to a situation, a wish, or an emotion; it could be either a positive or a negative situation.

The knot can bring illness; it can also cure or drive it away. Nets and knots can bewitch one; they can also protect from bewitchment. Knots can both hinder childbirth and facilitate it: a knot in the umbilical cord before birth can harm the fetus, a knot in the umbilical cord preserves the newborn. Knots can bring illness or death and keep it at bay.¹⁷

The knot is a network, one that illustrates the connection of all things. The meaning of the network is closely related with the spider web or the woven cosmos.



The Endless Knot
Tibetan: *dpal beu*
Sanskrit:
shrivatsa

Synthesis of the Endless Knot
<u>Tying</u>
Attachment
Bond
Capturing
<u>Network</u>
Interconnection

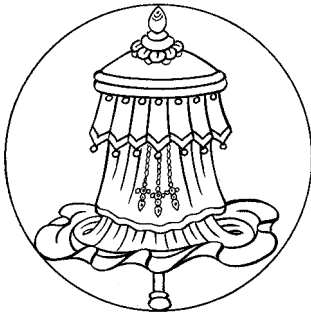
The Meaning of Endless Knot Across Cultures

Originally from India, the Tibetan endless knot first depicted two intertwined snakes (naga), as the union of opposite forces. Snakes represent the fertile principles of chthonic waters, waters from the underworld; renewal, based on ecdysis (shedding of the outer skin), and resurrection, reflected in the fact that snakes hibernate and then seemingly return to life. In Tibetan Buddhism, the knot represents the interdependence of all phenomena. The interconnected lines are a reminder that all phenomena depend on cause and effect, according to the law of karma. The endless knot is often used to remind us of auspicious connections among peoples.

Culture	Meaning of Knot
<i>Arabic</i>	Protection ¹⁸
<i>Celtic</i>	The knot work symbolizes perpetual motion. ¹⁹
<i>Chinese</i>	Longevity, binding the good, obstacle to evil
<i>Egyptian</i>	Emblem of life, symbol of immortality ²⁰
<i>Greek</i>	Preservation ²¹
<i>Hindu</i>	Immortality, infinity, fertility
<i>Tibetan</i>	Interdependence of all phenomena



*Endless knot in the
Kalachakra sand mandala
Photograph by the author*



The Victory Banner
Tibetan: *gyal mtshan*
Sanskrit:
dhvaja

Conclusion

The synthesis of the meaning of the endless knot is tying and network. In a more general sense, the meaning of immortality prevails in different parts of the world, as indicated in the previous chart.

The Victory Banner

The Tibetan victory banner is a wooden cylindrical structure covered with a small parasol on the top. The sides of the parasol are covered with many layers of frills, aprons, and scarves. The victory banner has its origins in an ancient Indian military standard. In ancient India, the banner was designed to instill terror in the enemy; often, actual heads and skins of animals such as tigers and crocodiles were used as decorations intended to frighten others.

Symbolic Meaning of The Victory Banner

The meaning of the victory banner is related to the word *victory* and the air element. It also derives some meaning from the parasol.

Air Element. Flags and banners gain life only with the presence of the wind, the air element. Together with fire, water, and earth, the air element is one of the four elements. The air element is linked to the creative breath of life. Stormy winds are connected in many mythologies with the idea of creation and space as a medium for movement and for the emergence of the life process. The air is the medium for light, color, sound, and smell. Most significantly, it is the communication channel between heaven and earth.



Deities carrying banners, detail of Tankha ,19th century
From *The Buddha*

Synthesis of the Victory Banner

Air Element
Creative Breath
Creative Winds
Communication between heaven
and earth

Sun
Center
Time
Cycles of Time

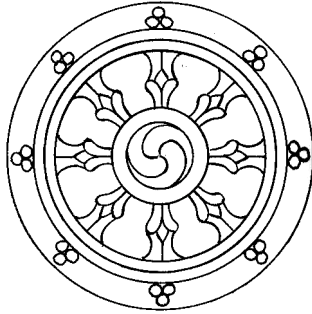
The Meaning of The Victory Banner Across Cultures

In Tibetan Buddhism, one kind of victory banner is suspended from the ceiling of monasteries as decoration. This particular banner is called “yellow central parasol” (dkyil-gdugs-ser-po); this name might indicate that the victory banner originated as a kind of variation of the parasol.²²

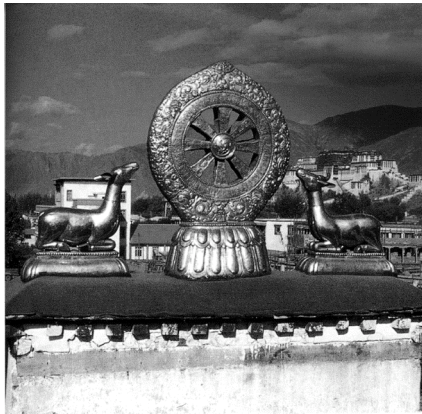
<i>Culture</i>	Meaning of Victory Banner
<i>Chinese</i>	Ideogram wu denotes both banner and being. ²³
<i>Christian</i>	Victory won by Christ’s resurrection to glory. ²⁴
<i>Hindu</i>	Victory over darkness
<i>Tibetan</i>	Victory of Buddha

Conclusion

The prevailing meaning of the victory banner is victory and its interaction with the wind, spreading the sense of victory in all the directions.



The Wheel
 Tibetan: *khor lo*
 Sanskrit:
chakra



Wheel and two deer, representing the turning of the wheel of Dharma in Sarnath
 Robert E. Fisher. *Art of Tibet*

The Wheel

In Indian ancient times, the wheel appeared as a solar symbol on clay seals. Some of these have been excavated at archeological sites of the Harapan civilization in the Hindu Valley. In pre-Buddhist India, the wheel had two meanings: a weapon and a symbol of the sun.

Symbolic Meaning of the Wheel

The symbolic meaning of the wheel is related to its shape, which resembles a sun, and its function. The wheel presents a dual concept of stillness at the center and eternal movement at the outside edge.

The Sun. The wheel is a perfect description of the sun as a center with the rays of light as its spokes.

Eternal Movement. The image of the wheel has often been used to depict a variety of cyclical movements, including the clock, the zodiacs, and certain calendars. Because the movement is constant and never-ceasing, the symbolism is related to renewal, regeneration, and immortality.

Synthesis of the Wheel
<u>Sun</u>
Center
Time
Cycles of Time
<u>Eternal Movement</u>
Renewal
Regeneration
Immortality

The Meaning of the Wheel Across Cultures

In Tibetan Buddhism, the wheel symbolizes Buddha's teachings, the wheel of Dharma, the way out of the illusory world (of rotation) to the center. Buddha's first discourse at Sarnath is known as the first turn of the wheel of Dharma.

The meaning ascribed to the wheel in a few cultures is shown below:

Culture	Meaning of Wheel
<i>Buddhist</i>	Wheel of law
<i>Egyptian</i>	Man is fashioned on the potter's wheel.
<i>Graeco-Roman</i>	Solar wheel depicts the sun chariot of Helios.
<i>Hindu</i>	The wheel stylized as lotus represents the chakras, spiritual centers of the body.
<i>Jain</i>	The eternally revolving wheel of Time
<i>Sumero-Semitic</i>	The wheel of life and the wheel of sun are attributes of the sun gods.
<i>Taoist</i>	The phenomenal world

Conclusion

The wheel's meaning relates its representation of the sun, consequently the center, time, and cycles of time. The wheel also is seen to represent eternal movement and is connected with time, renewal, and regeneration in many cultures.



Wheel of Dharma
From *The Buddha*

Metaphysical Symbols and Cross-Cultural Inspiration: Conclusion

The most difficult aspect of this research was to disregard each symbol's cultural, religious, mythological, and ritualistic backgrounds and meanings. It is the nature of symbols to always refer to a multitude of meanings, many of which are intertwined; separating them presented challenges.

Even though this investigation considered just the shape, function, and natural habitat of the symbols, most of the symbols were still pregnant in meaning and rich in significance. They revealed important aspects of reality across the ages and across many cultures.

For a closer comparison of meanings, the table entitled Summary Synthesis of the Eight Auspicious Symbols presents all eight symbols and their respective meanings. Three main concepts were grouped with respect to the elements.

- Symbols related to the water element and the network of meanings associated with fertility and life are highlighted by the band of blue.
- Symbols connected with the symbol of the sun and the meaning of eternal regeneration are highlighted in yellow.
- Symbols related to the spiral shape and to essential movements of nature are highlighted in pink.

Since many layers of interpretations were pulled away for this study, we come to very basic revelations. What lies beneath these symbols is the wisdom of pure observation and understanding of laws of nature. This is what makes the symbols universal and metaphysical.

Many terms — such as potentiality, regeneration, resurrection and immortality — appear more than one time for more than one symbol. The simple celebration of life contained in the fertility of waters, the celebration of light and life that arrives with the sun's rays, the regeneration of times and the essential movements in nature all appear with some frequency. These are simple concepts that have been sacred for centuries. It is only relatively recently that people have given less attention to these areas and desacralized them, moved them away from the sacred sphere. The modernity of today's times — rationalization, technology, mass production, alienation — has contributed to us losing touch with the wholeness of life, with understanding the principles of nature, the environment that we live in, and ourselves as part of it. Never have we been so disconnected with ourselves and our environment.

The language of symbols is a visual, poetic language with many layers of meanings and depth. It inspires us to understand essential realities about matter and spirit that have moved human emotions for eons. Symbols are intriguing and important in that they reveal a mode of reality that touches us deeply. Long before the existence of culture, and culture separateness, symbols have sparked people's imagination to inspiration and action. The emotions evoked by symbols are not separated according to gender, color, race or religion; in the language of symbols, we are all one.

Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One* ([London]: Harvill Press, 1965) 203.
2. *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (n.p.: IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., n.d.).
3. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: n.p., 1958) 437. The role of the hierophant in religion is often defined as being to bring the congregants into the presence of that which is deemed holy. The word is from the Greek: ta hiera (the holy) and phainein (to show).
4. Rene Guenon, *Symboles de la Science Sacrée* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962).
5. J. C Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979) 16.
6. Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999) 171.
7. Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* 173.
8. Loden Sherap Dagab Rinpoche, *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture: An Investigation of the Nine Best-Known Groups of Symbols* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995).
9. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (Editions Robert Laffont S.A. et Editions Jupiter, 1973) 304.
10. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* 16.
11. Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* 176
12. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 1081.
13. Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* 181.
14. Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* 185.
15. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism Search book edition* (London: Harvill Press, 1961) 133.
16. Eliade, *Images and Symbols* 133.
17. Eliade, *Images and Symbols* 112.
18. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 575.
19. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 575.
20. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 575.
21. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 575.
22. Dagab Rinpoche, *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture* 25.
23. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 66.
24. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 66.

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