
Significance of Buddhist Symbols in Ladakh

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Abstract

Symbols are found in each and every religious tradition. The symbols help to create the humankind in the formation of solidarity within society. Though in most of the cases, people use the positive aspects of symbols but sometimes it provokes havoc in the society. The emergences of these symbols came up along the philosophy of all the religions in the world. The Tibetan religious symbolism is mostly connected with the teaching of Buddha Shakyamuni. The ancient Nalanda monastic education system has influenced the people of Tibet dates back to 7th century. Similarly, in Ladakh, the peoples are practicing Tibetan form of Buddhism since the 10th century. The practice of different symbols by Ladakhi people in their day-to-day life represents their religion such as Prayer wheel and Prayer flag, which are very important and had been practicing since ancient times. These symbols represent the living heritage of wisdom and compassionate attitudes towards all sentient beings. Buddhist values and symbols have a great hold on the lives of people living in Ladakh in modern times. All aspect of their lives revolves around Buddhist values and symbols from birth to death. In Ladakh Buddhist societies, there is not such a wide gap between spiritual and material things, as there seems to exist in the western civilization of today. Symbols are a sign that we used to

remind ourselves of the inter-relation between inward and outward, between mental activities and material appearances.

Keywords: *Religious Symbolism, Prayer Flags, Prayer Wheel, Buddhism in Ladakh, Religion, Culture, Torma*

Introduction

Generally, a symbol is an object that represents, stands for, or suggests an idea, belief, and action. Every symbol is an outcome of the psychic body of a man and his mind (Kumar, 2013). In Hinduism concepts like ‘sacred cow’, tulsi pooja, Shivling pooja etc, in Sikhism, there are five symbols Kesh, Kirpan, kara, kanga, and kashera, in Muslim religion green flag with crescent moon and star and ‘burkha’ for women are symbols, which represents their respective religions. Likewise, in Buddhism symbol of Chakra, prayer flag and prayer wheel,

wheel of life, eight auspicious signs and mandalas represents the doctrine of Buddhism.

Symbols give society a sense of worth and purpose, allowing it to distinguish the special from the ordinary. It plays a significant role in culture as well as in religion. There is hardly any religion where there is no significance of symbols. Symbols are very central to every religion. In fact, many anthropologists view religion as a series of symbols that people in a given community believe and explain the order of the universe and their place in the world. Religious symbolism can also extend into social and political interactions, becoming an integral part of cultural identity. French Sociologist Emile Durkheim called religion as “symbolic representation of society”. Religious symbols maintain, reinforce and perpetuate religious belief system. The

peak experiences in the wakeful state, dream state, deep sleep state and super conscious state are all expressed through symbols in art, religion, and philosophy. In order to interpret any symbol in totality, one should try to relive those experiences. The symbols cannot be understood merely by applying the intellect. Though born out of the terrestrial sphere, they do not belong to it. They have their roots in the higher dimensions of spiritual life (Dauglas, 2002).

Objectives:

The main objectives of our study are:

To develop an understanding the meaning of symbols

To understand the importance of the practicing symbols in day-to-day life in Ladakh.

To know the role of symbols in Buddhist religion in Ladakh.

Research Methodology

The sources used for the study are comprised of secondary sources like books, journals, newspapers, magazines, report, articles, and websites.

Study Area

Historically, Ladakh was an independent kingdom which during the medieval era was integrated into Tibet and later was brought into Jammu in the late 18th century. Since then, Ladakh was constantly brought into the politics of its neighbors. The region also came under the colonial influence during the British rule in India. In spite of these, people of Ladakh have succeeded in developing their own distinct culture (Tsering, 2010). In area, Ladakh is almost the same size as England that supports a population of nearly 10 million. As per the latest national census, the proportion of Buddhist population in the region is

45.87 percent (India 2014). The vast majority of who live as farmers in small villages. Since the rainfall is very less, the people here have to rely on glacial melt water, which is brought to the field through an elaborate channel system. Culture, tradition and limited population growth has helped to ensure the natural carrying capacity of the land is not exceeding. (Nordberg, 2000). Most of the Ladakhi families own land and a number of animals. Land holdings are neither sold nor divided but passed in an intact form from one generation to next. Growing season is for only four months in summer. However, local varieties like wheat, barley produce plentiful yields. In lower altitude, there grows apples, apricots, and few vegetables. Agricultural inputs have been simple in the form of non-mechanized tools. Ploughing is done using animal power. Manure made mainly of night soil and

some animal dung formed an important input to the soil (Ball, 1995).

Buddhism penetrated Ladakh during Emperor Asoka's time in 204 B.C. However, the form of Buddhism popularly called Mahayana Buddhism came to Ladakh with the blessing of the land by the great Buddhist saint Padmasambhava in the 8th century A.D. There is at least one monastery in almost every village. The most family has one of its members as a monk in the monastery and there is constant interaction between villagers and the monks. The teachings of Buddha permeate in almost all aspects of life. The long-standing knowledge of integrating environmental knowledge with social and religious understanding clearly reflects the close relationship between people and the mother earth. The Buddhist here believes that all the things on the earth are interconnected. There is nothing in existence and exist

as a separate fix isolated entity and as such human existence is dependent on the diverse organisms within the natural world each playing a role in the natural economy of the Biosphere. This view is also found at the heart of the ecological perspective particularly as influenced by system theory which recognizes that everything in this world is woven into a subtle and intricate web of relationships.

Buddhist Symbol: Origin and Development

Buddhist symbols are the use of art to represent certain aspects of Buddha dharma, which began in the 4th century BCE. Anthropomorphic symbolism appeared from around the 1st century CE with the arts of Mathura and the Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara and was combined with the previous symbols. In the second century BCE, people started to

excavate Buddhist monasteries in rock, creating a large amount of artwork to withstand the ages. Probably the earliest typical Buddhist monument is the 'Stupa', which was often specially decorated. The first actual Buddha images appeared around the first century BCE, so until then the artwork was largely symbolic in nature with the appearance of Buddhist Tantra around the 6th century, a wealth of new artwork and symbolism appeared, as imagination and visualization form a major technique in meditation practices. From this moment on, a pantheon of deities and protectors appeared, together with a vast collection of symbolic items, such as the Vajra and bell, mandalas etc. (viewonbuddhism.org, 2011) With the passage of time various symbolic innovations were later introduced, especially through Tibetan Buddhism. All ancient religions have in the course

of time developed many symbols to express various doctrinal concepts visually. Buddhism does not lag behind in this sphere but in fact, has given rise to many new symbols in addition to what it has derived from the common Indian heritage. To symbols, which were adopted from pre-Buddhist India, Buddhism has given new interpretations to suit its own purpose. Of these, the dharma-chakra, the ever-moving Wheel of Law, is the most prominent symbol of the Buddhists. Wheel of Law symbolizes Buddha's turning the wheel of universal law at Sarnath, Varanasi. The Bodhi tree symbolizes the Buddha's "full awakened state" at Bodh Gaya. In the Buddhist scriptures, it is written that Buddha himself depicted the "wheel of life" to illustrate his doctrine easily. With the advent of Buddhist Tantra around the 6th century, a wealth of new artwork and symbolism appeared

many of which later on incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism. In Ladakh, Buddhist symbol is commonly seen in a Buddhist monastery and around the villages, which are no different than Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist symbol since Ladakhi Buddhism is descendant of Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhist Wheel of Life: Symbol of Samsara

Usually, there are different diagrams to understand the concept clear. Likewise, wheel of life is also to comprehend the idea of whole Samsara. It is commonly seen on wall painting of Buddhist monastery and scroll painting. According to Tibetan sources wheel of life is depicted by Buddha himself to understand the suffering of Samsara and generating the renunciation to the world and finally to achieve Nirvana. That is why; Buddha started his first sermon

from the suffering at Sarnath, Varanasi after his enlightenment (Lama, 200).

Samsara is divided into six parts namely God, demi-god, human being, Hungry ghost, animal being and hell being. According to Buddhism whole sentient beings repeatedly encircles in six causes by three afflictive emotions. To symbolize the three negative emotions there are three depictions of a pig, bird and a snake. The pig signifies ignorance; bird signifies attachment and snake signify anger. According to Buddha, these afflictive emotions are the mandatory subject of purifying to achieve Nirvana. Otherwise, every being has to encircle in six parts and suffer a lot.

The Wheel of Life is divided into two parts namely superior and lower part where superior parts of being on the wheel of life (figure) represent god, demi-god, human being and three lower parts of being shown

on the wheel of life represents the hungry ghost, animal being, hell being.

In the superior part of being god represents suffering from death and hatred, demi-god represents suffering from death and suffering, and human beings are suffering from aging, dying and birth. In the lower part of being hungry ghost represents suffering from hunger, animal beings represent killing one another and hell beings represents extreme heat and cold.

Eight Auspicious: Symbol of Good Fortune

Groupings of eight auspicious symbols were originally used in India at ceremonies such as an investiture or coronation of a king. In Buddhism, these eight symbols of good fortune represent the offerings made by the gods to Shakyamuni Buddha immediately after he gained enlightenment” (Beer, 1999). Today

these symbols are largely used in Buddhist region of Himalaya.

The eight auspicious sign divided into eight symbols namely right-coiled white conch which symbolizes the deep, far-reaching and melodious sound of the dharma teaching which being appropriate to different nature predispositions and aspiration of disciplines awakens them from the deep slumber of ignorance and urges them to accomplish their own and others welfare, precious umbrella symbolizes the wholesome activity of preserving beings from illness, harmful forces, obstacles and so forth in this life and in future lives. It also represents the enjoyment of a feast of benefit under its cool shade, victory Banner symbolizes the victory of the activities of one's own and others body, speech, and mind over obstacles and negativities, golden Fish symbolizes the auspicious of all living

beings in a state of fearlessness, without the danger of drawing in the ocean of sufferings and migrating from place to place freely and spontaneously just as a fish swim freely without fear through water, dharma wheel symbolizes the auspiciousness of the turning of the precious wheel of Buddha's doctrine, auspicious drawing symbolizes mutual dependence of religious doctrine and secular affairs. Similarly, it represents the union of wisdom and method, lotus flower symbolizes the complete purification of the defilements of the body, speech, and mind and the full blossoming of wholesome deeds in blissful liberation and vase of treasure symbolizes an endless rain of long life, wealth and prosperity and all the benefits of this world and liberation.

Torma: Symbol of God, Goddess, and Bodhisattvas

Torma sculpture is usually made of roasted barley (Tib. Tsampa) with different size, shapes, and colors, use in Buddhist ritual for different purposes. It is also equal to the art of Tibetan scroll painting (Tib. Thangka) and art of statue making and essential part of the ritual for both Tibetan Buddhist and the indigenous Bon tradition.

Torma is a combination of two Tibetan words: 'tor' means to dispense, referring to non-attachment to phenomenon especially in regards to benefiting others, and 'ma' is a sound of affection and refers to giving and having a fondness for giving equally. The significance of torma (cake-offering) is important to Tibetan Buddhist ritual and practicing inner qualities for liberating and other purposes. This can be seen easily in

every Buddhist monastery, in family settings and on special social occasions in culturally Tibetan areas including Bhutan, Mongolia and Nepal and the Himalayan regions of Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Lhahoul-Spiti, Kinnaur and so forth. It symbolizes the different gods, protectors, bodhisattvas etc. and is mainly use in birth, new building, marriages, death ceremony, meditation, Buddhist monastic festival, world peace, good harvest, untimely death and exterminate misfortunate of evil etc. Likewise, another purpose of torma is accumulation meritorious action and illuminating defilements that is known as secret torma.

The Prayer Wheel: Symbol of Accumulating Good Karma

Many Buddhist symbols exhibit ideals like compassion and wisdom. For example, the prayer wheels, which are omnipresent in the Tibetan spiritual community such as monasteries and

almost on every street, corner in Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan, and Tibet. The Prayer Wheel is the wheel of the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum, the essence mantra of compassion Buddha Arya Chenrezig received from the Buddha's upon request, and which represents the essence of all the qualities of body, speech, mind and actions of the Buddha's. By spinning this prayer wheel in a clock wise direction with good intention will benefit to all the sentient beings and helps to liberate from the cyclic existence.

There are varieties of prayer wheel that we see today such as, hand prayer wheel, and water prayer wheel etc. Almost all the prayer wheels contain parchment on which a mantra or sacred text is inscribed. These invocations are usually in the form of the Compassion Buddha's mantra, Om Mani Padme Hum, and it is believed

that "each spin of a mantra in the wheel invokes an emanation of Avalokitesvara. It is said that the power of the mantras will spread when the wheel is turned. The prayer wheel's cylinder is turned clockwise during meditation or prayer, "each turn sending a mantra out to the world" The Tibetan Buddhist believes that each individual is connected to, and a part of, the cosmic energy, and, therefore, as one turns the prayer wheel one sends positive force into our universe and through this positive actions accumulation of positive karma.

Prayer Flag: Symbol of Protector

Commonly found in Tibetan areas and trans-Himalayan region are the many Prayer Flags that decorate monasteries, houses, and even mountain passes. The Prayer flag is one of the most important symbols in Tibetan Buddhism.

It is believed that the special blessing power of the mantras printed on them is spread all over the world by the wind and to protect from misfortunes. Traditionally, prayer flags have a combination of mantras, special prayers and auspicious symbols printed on them. For example, the Wind horse symbol (symbolizing the idea of well-being or good fortune or luck) is often inscribed on the center of prayer flag. The Wind Horse (Tib. Lung-ta), a mythical Tibetan creature from pre-Buddhist times, combines the speed of the wind and the strength of the horse to carry prayers from earth to the heavens. It is believed that when one's lung-ta is low obstacles constantly arise. When lung-ta is high good opportunities abound. It is believed that raising Wind Horse prayer flags is one of the best ways to raise one's lung-ta energy. Similarly, in the corners of the traditional prayer flag

are the "Four Dignities": the Garuda (wisdom), the Dragon (gentle power) the Snow Lion (fearless joy), and the Tiger (confidence). They represent the qualities and attitudes necessary for the spiritual path to enlightenment. Sometimes The Eight Auspicious Symbols are depicted around the perimeter of prayer flag. Occasionally, at the top center are inscribed with the three main Bodhisattvas: Avalokiteshvara (Compassion), Manjushri (Wisdom) and Vajrapani (Power).

Usually, the flags come in five different colors: blue corresponds with the sky, white with clouds, red with fire, green with water and yellow with earth. (This is different from the usual general symbolism of colors, which is related to the elements: black/blue for air, red for fire, white for water and yellow for earth. Most of the Prayer Flag also consist of the Vajra (dorje),

which is the symbol of indestructibility. In Buddhism, it represents true reality, the being or essence of everything existing.

Prayer flags are not only strung on ropes to hang between two poles, they can also be hung like a flag from one pole. In ancient times the prayer flags would have been made of cotton, dyed with natural inks, and hand printed. However, the introduction of wooden printing blocks from China in the 15th century made the process of producing them easier. This tradition of printing on the wooden blocks passed from generation to generation, and even now it is used in the Trans-Himalayan region as well as in Tibet for printing prayer flags. Most prayer flags imported to the West today are woodblock printed. In a nutshell, the main objective of a prayer flag is to prevent hindrance and to purify the negative emotions.

Conclusion

Symbols provide the means whereby man can interact meaningfully with his natural and social environment. Without symbols, there would be no human interactions and no human society. Social life can only proceed if members of society largely share the meanings of symbols. If this were not the case, meaningful communication would be impossible. However, common symbols provide only the means by which human interaction can be accomplished. In order for the interaction to proceed, each person involved must interpret the meanings. This is made possible by the existence of common symbols. In Blumer's view, human beings act on the basis of meanings that they give to objects and events rather than simply reacting either to external stimuli such as social forces or internal stimuli such as organic drives.

The religious symbolism plays a pivotal role in each and every society and every religion whether, it is ancient times, medieval or in the modern age. The usage of symbols sometimes differs because of the cultural difference but their goal is the same. Symbolism in broader perspective has manifest and latent functions, social scientific concepts first clarified for sociology by Robert K. Merton. For Merton manifest function refers to the overt or intended purpose of the action. Latent function on the other hands refers to implicit or unintended purpose. Merton argues social action sometimes have latent functions far more significant than their more manifest purpose. Consider for example Merton's classic example of The Hopi Rain Dance. (Kumar, 2013) (Edles, Classical and contemporary sociological theory: Text and reading, 2008) While the manifest

or overt, the purpose of dance is to produce rain; the latent function is to reaffirmed group identity, solidarity or cohesion. (p.2008).

In Buddhism, the objective of Buddhist symbols signifies to eliminate the hindrances and obstacles. Moreover, not only it eliminates the obstacles but also helps to attain Nirvana. The manifest functions of Buddhist symbols are to understand the teaching of Buddha in a comprehensive way. Latent functions of Buddhist symbols are varied. Having believed on these symbols, their attitude towards life transforms. It also allays anxiety and makes for a happiness world and perpetuates particular social order as well as support morality. Further, with the proper motivation and practice, it liberates human beings from the ignorance to enlighten, sorrow to happiness and finally towards the

achievement of Nirvana, where nirvana is the ultimate manifest functions.

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