

## Creative Symbols of the Tantric Path to Enlightenment.

To think in terms of 'studying' the Tantra is perhaps a mistake. We probably need instead to think of opening up to its influence, to its ambience. The Tantra is a world replete with images and symbols and it touches not so much our intellect as our imagination. Through exploring the symbols, images, and practices found within Tantric Buddhism, we enter into the Tantric world; we begin to experience life from a Tantric point of view. For the purposes of this term, Sangharakshita defines a symbol as 'an object which is somehow seen or felt or experienced as possessing some sort of heightened significance, though what it is you find difficult to reduce to concepts.' (*The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life*, Mitrata, p. 33-4.)

He is concerned with symbols not in a historical sense 'but as creative for us, here and now, acting on us, energizing us, sparking off developments in our own spiritual lives, developments which will lead us in the direction, ultimately, of Enlightenment itself.' (from *The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life*).

Vessantara identifies seven distinctive features that mark out the Tantra and these may provide a valuable reference point in progressing through the term (*Meeting the Buddhas* (Windhorse), p.208ff.).

1. The Tantra is concerned with direct experience
2. It is concerned with symbols and magic
3. It addresses the whole person
4. It sees the world in terms of energy
5. It makes use of the strongest experiences of life
6. It seems Samsara and Nirvana as related
7. It begins at the highest point of experience.

In responding to the guideline questions for this term, our emphasis is more on exploring the symbols and images rather than on presenting a 'right' answer. The aim is to dwell with the images so that their significance begins to disclose itself more and more fully.

## Primary Study Material

The material for this term is available from a number of sources. First, you can refer to the original eight audio lectures and the verbatim transcripts available from [www.freebuddhistaudio.com](http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com) . You can also make use of the publication by Windhorse entitled *Creative Symbols of the Tantric Path*. This volume incorporates quite a bit of seminar material and so constitutes an expansion of the original lectures.

1. **The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life.**
2. **The Tantric Symbolism of the Stupa.**
3. **The Symbolism of the Sacred Thunderbolt or Diamond Sceptre of the Lamas.**
4. **The Symbolism of the Cosmic Refuge Tree and the Archetypal Guru.**
5. **The Symbolism of the Cremation Ground and the Celestial Maidens.**
6. **The Symbolism of Offerings and Self-sacrifice.**
7. **The Symbolism of Colours and Mantric Sound.**
8. **The Symbolism of the Five Buddhas, 'Male' and 'Female'.**

## Suggested Further Reading for Term 10

- *Tibetan Buddhism – An Introduction* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse)
- *A Survey of Buddhism*, Sangharakshita (Windhorse), C3 sections 10-12
- *Buddhist Thought* by Paul Williams (Routledge), the section on Tantra
- *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, John Powers (Snow Lion, 1995)
- *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, Lama Anagarika Govinda (Century, 1987)
- *Meeting the Buddhas* by Vessantara (Windhorse), parts 2 and 4
- *The Cult of Tara* by Stephan Beyer (University of California)
- *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* by David Snellgrove (Serindia)
- *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Robert Thurman (Harpercollins)

## Suggested Further Reading by Unit

U1: *'Journey to Il Convento'*, and *'St Jerome Revisited'*, by Sangharakshita in *The Priceless Jewel. Sangharakshita – A New Voice* C10

U2: *Psychocosmic Symbolism of the Stupa*, Lama Anagarika Govinda  
*Buddhist Saints in India*, Reginald Ray (Oxford), C.10

*Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, Gregory Schopen (Hawaii), CC.5-7  
*Rainbow of Liberated Energy* by Ngakpa Chogyam

U3: *The Vajra and the Bell* by Vessantara (Windhorse)

U4: *The Refuge Tree* by Aloka (Padmaloka Books)

*The Refuge Tree as Mythic Context* by Aloka (Padmaloka Books)

*Teachers of Enlightenment* by Kulananda (Windhorse)

U6: *What is the Sangha?* By Sangharakshita (Windhorse), chapter 19 on Gratitude

U8: *The Mandala of the Five Buddhas* by Vessantara (Windhorse)

## **Study Questions**

### **Unit 1 The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life**

1. What is a symbol?
2. What does it mean to 'understand' a symbol?
3. In what ways is the Wheel of Life a mirror?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Tibetan Wheel of Life as a symbol for existence?
5. Explore the meaning of this passage: 'But what does seeing the bodhisattva really mean? It means seeing the spirit of Enlightenment at work in the whole world process and seeing ourselves, to the extent that we lead a spiritual life, as part and parcel of that.'<sup>1</sup>
6. What conclusions can you draw from the teaching of Buddha seeds and how these are distributed through the six realms?
7. What is the significance of the Buddha appearing in each of the six realms?

### **Unit 2 The Tantric Symbolism of the Stupa**

1. How do you respond to the symbol of the stupa? Which aspects of it, if any, have significance for you?
2. Explore the five elements in terms of energy. Must they be seen hierarchically or could they also be understood as five factors that we need to hold in balance in our lives?
3. What is rupa?
4. What is the function of initiation? What place does it have within the FWBO?
5. How can the stupa be used as a practical spiritual symbol?

### Unit 3 The Symbolism of the Sacred Thunderbolt or Diamond Sceptre of the Lamas

1. Do you find the vajra to be a meaningful symbol? In what ways?
2. What does the figure of Vajrasattva represent?
3. What does it mean to experience everything under its vajra aspect?
4. Why do you think the symbol of the vajra is so central to Tantric Buddhism?

### Unit 4 The Symbolism of the Cosmic Refuge Tree and the Archetypal Guru

1. What is the difference between escape and escapism? Is Buddhism escapism?
2. What is the significance of the differences between the Refuge Tree described here and the FWBO Refuge Tree?
3. Why don't we have gurus in the FWBO? Should we?
4. How important is the principle of lineage? What constitutes an authentic lineage?
5. What is a dakini?
6. Do you have esoteric refuges?

### Unit 5 The Symbolism of the Cremation Ground and the Celestial Maidens

1. Why do you think Western culture has such a fear of death?
2. What does the cremation ground symbolise?
3. Is inducing our fear and trying to face it the best way to overcome it?
4. Who or what are your dakinis?
5. How can the dakini within be stimulated?
6. How are we to distinguish between a growth promoting cremation ground and a situation that we simply can't handle?
7. Do you agree that living in the cremation ground is the essence of spiritual life?

### Unit 6 The Symbolism of Offerings and Self-sacrifice

1. Do you see your spiritual life in terms of sacrifice? Is this a useful way of seeing it?
2. How can offering function as an effective spiritual practice? What is your experience of this?
3. Why do we make offerings to the Buddha?
4. What is gratitude? How can we learn to cultivate it?

5. Do you think a culture of giving is desirable? If so what do you do to encourage this?

### Unit 7 The Symbolism of Colours and Mantric Sound

1. Is colour symbolism universal or culturally specific? Explore this using some specific examples.
2. How is a mantra a sound symbol?
3. What is your experience of the spiritual value of mantras?
4. Can mantras lead to enlightenment? If so how?
5. What is your favourite colour? What associations does it call up for you?
6. What application do the four Tantric rites have, if any, to your spiritual life?

### Unit 8 The Symbolism of the Five Buddhas, 'Male' and 'Female'

1. Do you respond to Tantric symbolism? If so, what do you respond to and why?
2. Explore the meaning and significance of the Trikaya doctrine.
3. What is a mandala?
4. Which of the five Buddhas appeals to you most and why?
5. How can the symbolism of the five Buddhas be applied in every day life?
6. Why do you think the five female Buddhas represent the Wisdom aspect of Enlightenment and the five male Buddhas the compassion aspect?

*This material was originally compiled by Nagapriya for the distance-learning version of the Mitra Study Course and has subsequently been edited and updated by Saccanama.*