

6. Buddhas as symbols

What is a symbol?

In these notes the word “symbol” is used in a particular way. Let’s start with a well known example of a symbol - a diamond. A diamond is a stone made up of carbon atoms. So it’s just part of the material world. Yet mysteriously, by looking closely at a diamond it can stimulate a rich and meaningful that can’t adequately put into words. In evoking something rich and meaningful it’s functioning as a symbol. Those who’ve experience diamonds in this way may talk of them conveying a sense of purity and illumination, but words don’t really do justice to the experience.

There’s a special correspondence between the material form of a symbol and the intangible meaning it evokes. They don’t work by learnt association, even though familiarity with their forms may help bring them alive. The symbols that are meaningful for one person are not necessarily the same as those that work for someone else. One person may have a fascination with lotus flowers but be indifferent to fountains, while for someone else it could be the other way around. Often particular symbols only become meaningful to someone after a certain point in their life. Sometimes their significance comes as a sort of bubble of “understanding” that surfaces unexpectedly.

To avoid misunderstanding we can distinguish between a “symbol” and a “sign”, giving these words rather specific meanings they do not necessarily carry in common parlance. While a symbol is trans-cultural and innate, a sign has significance because of a learnt association. For example, through a learning process we may come to associate the Union Jack with the state of Britain. So the Union Jack functions as a sort of sign. If we see it stamped on the back of an eclectic plug at an international airport, it probably means the plug is made to fit British electrical sockets.

Enlightened beings as symbols

Perhaps the richest and most complex of all symbols are those that depict Enlightened beings. In the Buddhist context such images are mainly covered by the non-historical Buddhas, and what are known as bodhisattvas and *dakinis* (although not all *dakinis* are Enlightened).

Some Buddhists focus most of their attention on one particular figure, which becomes more prominent in their minds than even the historical Buddha. Followers of the Pure Land school regard the Buddha *Amitabha* as central. He is known as the Buddha of infinite light. By another name (*Amitayus*) he is called the Buddha of infinite life. He is red in colour and is associated with the quality of unlimited love. Imagine how meditating on this Buddha’s pure unlimited love could impart a sense of both infinite light and life. As with other non-historical Buddhas, *Amitabha* has many associations. For example his emblem is the lotus (*padma*). *Amitabha* is associated with the “all discerning wisdom”. In other words *Amitabha* notices the finer differentiations of beings and things, and appreciates the uniqueness of everybody and everything. This is an essential quality of loving kindness. If we are really aware of another person we see their peculiarities and specific qualities, not just a vague blur of impressions.

We may see an illustration of a symbolic form of an Enlightened being, such as a hanging Tibetan scroll (*thanka*) with a painting of a brightly coloured figure. But just because we see the form it is not necessarily going to function as a symbol for us at the time. It only functions as a symbol if it triggers an awareness of a deeper dimension of reality.

Yab-yum symbolism

Yab-yum is the symbolism of a male and female Buddha in sexual union. It’s common to find paintings and images of this in Tibetan Buddhism. They’re treated with special reverence. Although two Buddhas are shown, a *yab-yum* statue or painting really represents two aspects of a single Buddha. It symbolises the union of opposites within a single Enlightened mind. The masculine Buddha is said to represent the compassion aspect of Enlightenment, and the female Buddha the wisdom aspect.

Yab-yum symbolism can serve as a reminder that there’s a deeper more satisfying pleasure which isn’t based on getting what we crave. It points the way to a deeper harmony and contentment. Of course *yab-yum* will only have this effect on us if we are receptive to its symbolic significance. This requires a certain sensitivity and maturity.

Meditations based around visualising a Buddha

There are many visualisation meditation practices, some of them very elaborate. Most involve seeing in imagination an archetypal Enlightened being in colour and developing a sense of their qualities. Visualisation of their form is often

accompanied by a mantra.

Although this sort of meditation can be very effective, it's not the only approach to becoming concentrated and moving towards Buddhahood. It is often suggested that visualisation meditation is preceded with a meditation to nurture loving-kindness. Creating a strong atmosphere of goodwill makes it easier to strike an emotional chord with the Enlightened being that's visualised.

If we are doing a visualisation meditation ideally we'll have a vivid experience of what we've conjured up - just as the figures we see in dreams can be vivid and captivating. If what we imagine is both vivid and captivating then we are experiencing it in an archetypal way. Putting this the other way around, we can talk of experiencing the figures and events within an archetypal realm.

Archetypal Realm

An archetypal realm is a world or realm in which everything has a special fascination and significance. This may seem a bit abstract, so once again an example is called for. Wordsworth's well loved poem *I wandered lonely as a cloud* is a good illustration of how yellow daffodils acted as a symbol for him, and through this he entered an archetypal realm:

*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.*

*The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed---and gazed---but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:*

*For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.*

As the poem indicates an archetypal realm is a sort of inner, mental world. We access this inner world through what Wordsworth calls the *inward eye* when in *vacant or in pensive mood* - in other words through imagination when our mind is spacious and stilled. As the poem also indicates, an archetypal realm is deeply pleasurable in a way that can't be accounted for in ordinary terms. It holds a deep attraction, just as the yellow daffodils did for Wordsworth. This appeal is on-going, as demonstrated by the fact that Wordsworth continued to enjoy the sight of the daffodils on other occasions - through his imagination.

All of us have the potential to experience an archetypal realm. The fact that Wordsworth's poem *I wandered lonely as a cloud* is so popular indicates quite a lot of people have a sense of it. Many have experienced an archetypal realm in a significant dream, or when appreciating the beauty of nature. If we are fascinated by a sunset, and the experience fills us with peaceful elation, then we've probably entered an archetypal realm.

Example of a visualisation meditation

By way of example of a visualisation practice, here's a simplified one in outline. It's based on visualising an idealised form of the historical Buddha. The practice starts by seeing, in our mind's eye, an unbounded blue sky. Within this there appears an expanse of land on which there's a beautiful large tree with heart shaped leaves. Under the tree sits the Buddha. He's seated on a cushion of grass (or in more mythologized versions of the practice on a perfect lotus flower). He has shining black hair, a golden complexion, and a gentle kindly expression on his face. His robes are saffron (or in some versions other colours with rich embroidery). There's a golden aura about his head and body. Looking at him, and repeating his mantra - "OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNI SAKYAMUNI SAVHA" - we imagine the Buddha is actually there with us. Feeling that the Buddha is actually there, we try to connect with his inner qualities: his love, his unshakeable equanimity, his wisdom, and his unbounded freedom. (These qualities are inherently attractive which makes it easier to focus on them.) In this world of light and sound that has been created in imagination the inner qualities of the Buddha are gradually absorbed through a ray of golden light that links the Buddha's heart with ours. The practice ends with the Buddha and everything else dissolving into the blue sky and the blue sky fading away.

The three kayas in Tibetan temples

Reality can be stratified in many ways, but one of the most ancient and popular is the following threefold division:

- ordinary everyday level of perception,
- archetypal realm/level
- absolute level.

These three levels are often represented in the three floors of Tibetan temples. On each floor of the temple there is an image of the Buddha, and each of the images indicates how the Buddha would appear when seen from that level of reality. The details of how this works out are provided in table 1 (on the next page).

This threefold structure of many Tibetan temples also illustrates the teaching of the "three bodies of the Buddha" (known as the three *kayas*, or the *Trikaya*). These are really three aspects of Buddhahood; or Buddhahood as viewed from each of the three levels of reality.

Although the level of absolute reality (the *Dharmakaya*) is represented by an image in the temple, strictly speaking this level defies all description and any symbolic representation.

Acknowledgement

This table and the section of the notes on "the three kayas in Tibetan temples" was adapted from material contained in Sangharakshita's lecture: *Symbols of Tibetan Buddhist Art*