



Newsletter Archives

Color Symbolism in Buddhist Art

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Color Symbolism In Buddhist Art

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Esoteric Buddhism is unique in presenting through visual images, the most abstract of concepts, which then acquire an intuitive simplicity, graspable by all. Thus there exists in Buddhism the concept of a rainbow body. The 'rainbow body' is the penultimate transitional state of meditation in which matter begins to be transformed into pure light. It is said to be the highest state attainable in the realm of 'samsara' before the 'clear light' of Nirvana. Indeed as much as the spectrum contains within itself all possible manifestations of light, and thus of color, the rainbow body signifies the awakening of the inner self to the complete reservoir of terrestrial knowledge that it is possible to access before stepping over the threshold to the state of Nirvana. Understandably, when depicted in the visual arts, due to the profusion of colors, the result is spectacularly unique.



Further, one often comes across references to five colors (pancha-varna). These colors are white, yellow, red, blue and green. That these colors were canonized as rich in symbolism is borne by the following quotation from the Chandamaharosana Tantra:

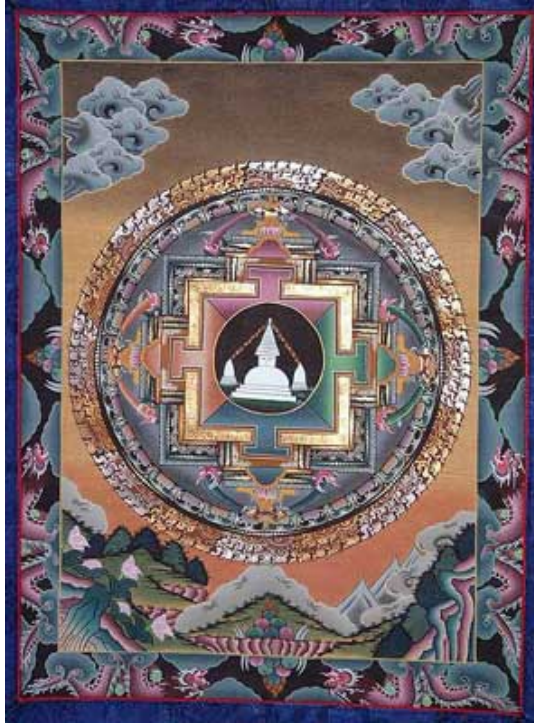
- Black symbolizes killing and anger
- White denotes rest and thinking
- Yellow stands for restraining and nourishing
- Red for subjugation and summoning and
- Green means exorcism

The enumeration of the colors may change but the number remains five. Thus the five transcendental Buddhas, personification of the abstract aspects of Buddhahood, are each endowed with a different color in their sadhanas:

1. Vairochana - White bodied
2. Ratnasambhava - Yellow bodied
3. Akshobhya - Blue bodied
4. Amitabha - Red bodied
5. Amoghasiddhi - Green bodied

Here it is relevant to note that each of these five Buddhas and their associated colors are said to further the transformative process whereby specific human delusions are changed to positive qualities. Specifically it is believed that by meditating on the individual colors, which contain their respective essences, the following metamorphosis can be achieved:

- White transforms the delusion of ignorance into the wisdom of reality
- Yellow transforms pride into wisdom of sameness
- Blue transforms anger into mirror like wisdom
- Red transforms the delusion of attachment into the wisdom of discernment
- Green transforms jealousy into the wisdom of accomplishment



Hence we find that ancient Buddhism thought placed much emphasis on the spiritual significance of colors, which naturally influenced the development and practice of Buddhist aesthetics.

A further investigation into the five colors takes us to the Mahavairochana-Sutra, which states that a mandala, the quintessential symbol of Tibetan Buddhism should be painted in five colors. It further prescribes that one should start at the interior of the mandala with white and to be followed by red, yellow, blue and black.

The Chakrasambhara-tantra prescribes that the walls of a mandala should be painted in five colors and should maintain the order of black in the interior followed by white, yellow, red and green. In certain mandalas, the four directions within the palace are indicated by different colors. The east is indicated by white, west by red, north by green and the south by

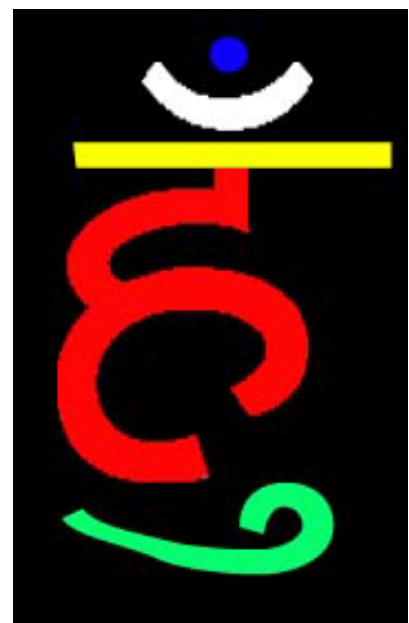
yellow while the center is painted blue. The Kalachakra-tantra, however, prescribes a completely different color scheme to indicate different directions: the color black indicates east, yellow west, white north, and red stands for the south. Whatever the color association with directions, the protecting circle of a mandala is usually always drawn in red.

The reference to the five colors has been made also in an altogether different context, namely the process of the purification and empowering of sense organs. This occurs during meditation on goddess Tara:

- White for eyes
- Blue for ears
- Yellow for the nose
- Red for the tongue
- Green for the head.

----- (Sadhana of Goddess Tara)

In a spectacular visualization, the Tibetan tradition states that the syllable hum (part of Om Mani Padme Hum) although blue in color radiates five different colors. The dot (drop) on the crescent should be blue, the crescent is white, the head is yellow, the syllable 'ha' is red and the vowel 'u' is of green color.





The four elements air, fire, water and earth are also identified in the Kalachakra-tantra with four different colors: blue (or black), red, white and yellow, respectively. These four elements are further depicted as semi-circular, triangular, circular, and square respectively. This is a precursor to Tantric imagery where color and geometry (not mutually exclusive) are the basic building blocks making up the whole edifice of Tantric symbolism.

Thus even though the context may vary, Buddhism identifies the significance of a few principal colors with their import being propounded in a variety of circumstances. These Colors are:

1. White
2. Black
3. Blue
4. Red
5. Yellow
6. Green

White

White is not necessarily thought of as a color. It occurs when the whole spectrum of light is seen together or when red, yellow and blue colors are mixed. Everything is present in white; nothing is hidden, secret or undifferentiated. Thus too Saraswati the goddess of learning and knowledge is shown white in color. Indeed knowledge and learning should not be hidden, but be open and available to all.





White color is thought to have a very cold quality, as in snow, or an extremely hot quality, such as a burning metal. Either can be life threatening and can remind us of death and the end of things. Fittingly thus the goddess Tara in her form which grants longevity to worshippers is depicted as white hued (White Tara). She also denotes purity, holiness and cleanliness and is 'the one who leads out beyond the darkness of bondage'.

White is a color that both incorporates, and set things apart from the rainbow spectrum of everyday life.

The color white appears in numerous Buddhist episodes one of the well known being the birth of Buddha. Legend states that Queen Maya, mother of Buddha dreamt of a white elephant that flew through the air and touched her right side with its trunk. Now elephants are well known for their strength and intelligence, and are also associated with gray rain clouds and fertility. Indeed rainwater means that the seeds will be able to germinate and vegetative life will be able to spring forth. The white color of the majestic animal adds to this narrative an element of purity and immaculacy. In his former lives the Buddha had been an elephant several times, as mentioned in the Jatakas, or tales of his previous births. The white elephant is believed to have been the future Buddha himself who descended from heaven so that he could be born. It thus also represents for queen Maya a chaste birth, or the element of the triumph of spirit over the flesh.



Black



Black signifies the primordial darkness. In the realm where it is dark, because there is no light reflected, there is also a sound which we cannot hear as it is so high on the scale of harmonics that it is inaccessible to the hearing capacity of any physical being. The wonders of creation may be manifested through the gradual slowing down of vibrations. The darkness becomes light, the shadows colors, the colors sound, and sound creates form.

One of the most interesting examples is represented by the so-called black paintings. The special genre of the black thangkas, the potent, highly mystical paintings portraying shimmering, brilliant forms appearing out of a translucent darkness, came to full fruition in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Their aesthetic power derives from the contrast of powerful lines against a black background, making them one of the most effective means to appreciate the Tibetan mastery of line work.



There is a range of variations in the technique, beyond the boldness of gold lines over a black background, to large figures and settings and a variety of colors, and orange, flamed haloes.

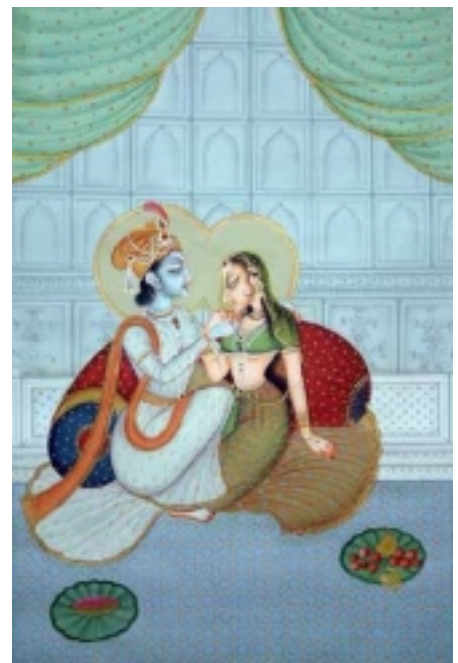
Black paintings, a relatively late appearance in Buddhist art, have added yet another means by which artists can conjure up visions of mysterious transcendent worlds. Like the fierce deities who are often the subject matter of these thangkas, the blackness signifies the darkness of hate and ignorance as well as the role these qualities have to play in the awakening of clarity and truth.



Thangkas with black background form a special category of contemplative paintings. They are a highly mystical and esoteric type, usually reserved for advanced practice. Black is the color of hate, transmuted by the alchemy of wisdom into compassion. Darkness represents the imminence of the absolute, the threshold of the experience. It is used for terrific ritual actions, the radical conquest of evil in all its forms - conquest not by annihilating, but by turning even evil into good. Thus, in the black paintings (T. nagtang) the black ground casts forth deities in luminous visions of translucent colors.

Blue

Eternity, truth, devotion, faith, purity, chastity, peace, spiritual and intellectual life, these are some of the associations that appear in many different cultures and express a general feeling that blue is the coolest, most detached and least "material" of all hues. The Virgin Mary and Christ are often shown wearing blue, and it is the attribute of many sky gods including Amun in Egypt, the Sumerian Great Mother, the Greek Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans), the Hindu Indra, Vishnu and his blue-skinned incarnation, Krishna.





In Buddhism both light (sky blue) and dark aspects of this mysterious color are important. The significance of the light shade is reflected in the supremacy of the semi-precious stone turquoise in the daily spiritual and religious life of the devout Buddhist, who holds various beliefs about this stone. In general terms turquoise is a symbol of the blue of the sea and the sky. Infinity in the sky speaks of the limitless heights of ascension. The stone is opaque as the earth, yet it lifts the spirit high, laying bare to us the wisdom of both the earth and the sky.

When worn in a ring, it is believed to assure a safe journey;



worn in the ear it prevents reincarnation as a donkey;

appearing in a dream, it is auspicious; when found, it brings the best of luck and gives new life (in contrast, it is not considered lucky to find gold or coral); when changing its color to green, it indicates hepatitis, yet at the same time it draws out jaundice. Most importantly it is believed to absorb sin. Strings of prayer beads too include turquoise. In fact, when worshipping the popular goddess Tara in her green form, because of the color association, it is desirable to do so with a rosary entirely composed of turquoise beads. There also exists as well the concept of living and dead turquoise. Living turquoise has a healthy blue color, whereas dead turquoise has turned either white or black. In the natural aging process of turquoise, exposure to light and body oils darkens the color, eventually turning it black. Tibetans compare this to human aging and death. Wearing "living" turquoise is therefore very desirable, as it will give long life to the wearer.





Turquoise has also been held as a sacred stone by ancient cultures other than the Tibetan. It was sacred in Egypt along with malachite and lapis lazuli. It was also sacred to the Persian culture, where it symbolized purity. American Indians believe it to be a protector and guardian of the body and soul. Gypsies wear this stone in their navels, believing it to be good for everything.

Nothing illustrates more the spectacular influence of the darker blue on Buddhist aesthetics than the 'Blue Buddha', also known as the Buddha of Medicine or Healing.

The most distinctive feature of this Medicine Buddha is his color, the deep blue of lapis lazuli. This precious stone has been greatly prized by Asian and European cultures for more than six thousand years and, until relatively recently, its ornamental value was on a par with, or even exceeded, that of the diamond. An aura of mystery surrounds this gemstone, perhaps because of its principal mines are located in the remote Badakshan region of northeast Afghanistan, an all-but-inaccessible area located behind the Hindu Kush. One commentator has written, "the finest specimens of lapis, intensely blue with speckled waves and swirls of shining gold-colored pyrite, resemble the night aglow with myriads of stars."



E.H. Schafer summarizes the Buddhist interest in lapis lazuli:

"The Chinese were not alone among the Far Eastern peoples in their admiration for the blue mineral. The Tibetans valued it above all others, even ahead of gold, and those highlanders saw in it the image of the azure sky, and said that the hair of their goddess had its color. Both men and women wore it on their heads."

Indeed to this day, statues prepared in Tibet and the Himalayn kingdom of Nepal have their hair painted blue.

Traditionally this beautiful stone was used to symbolize that which is pure or rare. It is said to have a curative or strengthening effect on those who wear it, and its natural smoothness allows it to be polished to a high degree of reflectivity. Specifically in alternative medicine, because of it

being associated with a certain 'coolness', it is used when inflammation is present, or when any internal bleeding or nervous condition exists. For all these reasons, plus the fact that deep blue light has a demonstrable healing effect on those who use it in visualization practices, lapis is the color of the principal Medicine Buddha, making this stone an important one in Buddhist mysticism.

Indeed the Lapis Healing Master is one of the most honored figures in the Buddhist pantheon. In one of the main sutras (canonical texts) concerning the Medicine Buddha, Shakyamuni tells his close disciple and attendant Ananda:

*I beseech you, Blessed Medicine Guru,
Whose sky-colored, holy body of lapis lazuli
Signifies omniscient wisdom and compassion
As vast as limitless space,
Please grant me your blessings*

Red

Red throughout the development of civilization has had connotations with life and those things considered sacred in some way. It has developed as synonymous with the preservation of our life force, as in the logos of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Danger signs and signals are also often surrounded in red to indicate warning or threat to life. Fire has two facets. It can be a warming lifesaver or an uncontrollable destroyer.

The symbolism of the color red shines forth in Buddhist aesthetics in the type of paintings known as red thangkas. A style requiring high technical virtuosity, all elements making up these painting are subsumed in the overall red field characteristic of this special genre of thangka. Red is the color of powerful rituals and deeds. It is the color of passion, transmuted to discriminating wisdom. These are especially relevant in especially vigorous meditation rituals requiring equally potent meditative tools.



Another dimension regarding the color red is the belief surrounding coral, the semi-precious stone which is a gift from our mother ocean to remind us of our eternal foundation. It is actually composed of the skeletons of little animals into reef-plant-like with hard branches. It reminds us of our bones - hard and durable. Coral teaches us form, also flow and flexibility within form. It lives and breathes in the sea but its roots are anchored in the earth.

It is one of the five sacred stones of the Tibetan Buddhists, and symbolizes the energy of life force.



It is often believed to be a protection against the evil eye. In a curious belief it was supposed to lighten in color and become pale if the wearer were ill or even exposed to illness - or were given poison. The coral would then darken as the wearer recovered. The same attribute was associated with a woman's menstrual periods,

which the coral was supposed to "share" with women. Coral was also associated with stopping the flow of blood from a wound, curing madness, imparting wisdom, and calming storms.



In Buddhism coral is believed to be generally good, and the Tibetans and Tibeto-Nepalese think of it as a good investment, and believe that the person who wears coral will have success in life. The color red is auspicious in Tibetan culture. It is a sacred color, one of the colors of the five Buddhas and the color of the monk's garments. It is believed to have protective qualities and is therefore often used to paint sacred buildings. In neighboring China, coral is a symbol of longevity, and in India it is thought to prevent hemorrhages. Hans Weihreter records beliefs about coral in western Tibetan cultures which center around blood. Coral is said to strengthen blood, and act beneficially for the menstruation of women.

Yellow

Yellow is the color closest to daylight. It has the highest symbolic value in Buddhism through its link with the saffron robes of monks. This color, previously worn by criminals, was chosen by Gautam Buddha as a symbol of his humility and separation from materialist society. It thus signifies renunciation, desirelessness, and humility. It is the color of earth, thus a symbol of rootedness and the equanimity of the earth.



Green



Green is in the middle of the visible, seven-color spectrum and thus epitomizes the qualities of balance and harmony. It is the color we relate to in nature, trees and plants. Hence Green Tara's color represents a blending of white, yellow, and blue - colors which symbolize, respectively, the functions of pacifying, increasing, and destroying. Green also denotes youthful vigor and activity and hence the Green Tara is always shown as a young girl having a mischievous and playful nature.

The Buddhist Lord of karma (action), Amoghasiddhi, is also associated with this color, thus reiterating that green in Buddhist thought is the color of action.

Another important color in Buddhist mysticism is golden. The statues prepared in the Tibetan regions are often painted with gold.



Not only the faces but often the complete figure is gilded over with pure gold. Indeed the practice of painting statues, particularly faces, with gold paint is exclusively Tibetan. If, therefore, a sculpture looks as if it has been given a face-lift with gold paint, it is likely to have emerged from Tibet, no matter where it was made.

Tibetans have a love for gold that stretches back to ancient times. This love is reflected in their workmanship in gold, which was praised as long ago as the Tang period in Chinese chronicles and which, therefore, may have been as intrinsic to them as it was to the Scythians in Central Asia.

Gold in Buddhism symbolizes the sun, or fire.



The most valuable of metals, it is accorded a sacred status through its association with Surya, the sun god of the Hindu pantheon. The alloying of gold with other alloying elements is therefore thought of as an act of sacrilege, since it dilutes the natural brilliance of the golden radiance. Thus when used in the fine arts, whether sculpture or painting, the gold is always of the purest 24 karat variety.

But though Buddhist aesthetics theorizes colors to be used primarily for their conventional symbolic significance, in practice it recognizes their powerful emotive effect. In application too it is not a simple question of hue, saturation and density. The pigments used are chosen, and adopted as traditional, because their particular color-inflections evokes the required emotive responses. These are not diluted in intensity or 'killed'; their force is always kept at its maximum. Further, such colors, combined as they often are to meet prescribed symbolism, are nevertheless also juxtaposed very skillfully in calculated quantities so as to produce definite but indescribable visual and emotive effects.

The figures represented in Buddhist art have naturally evolved from basic traditional principles. But Buddhist imagery is never concerned with imitating an external world. The objective colored surface is not meant to challenge comparison with any sensuously derived image of external reality. It is meant to stimulate radiant inner icons, whose bodies and features could be quite unrealistic in any ordinary sense of that word. Blue skin or red skin, many arms and heads are commonplace. The density and strength of colors, the vigor of plastic development can lift the imagery, so to speak, and at the same time interpose a barrier between the inner icon and any comparable visual object. This is meant to produce a higher key or grade of objectivity than any transient reflection on the retina of the eye, a consistent world of imagination against which visual phenomena seem gray and pale.

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