



# SYMBOLISM BEHIND ART AND COLOUR DENOTED ON THE BUDDHIST PRAYER FLAGS

DR. POONAM R. L. RANA

---

## Abstract

*Sacred Prayer Flags of different colours and symbols are not just decorative pieces. Symbols have more deeper meaning and the attached intangible beliefs than their mere outer creativity. Each and every colour and objects symbolizes good fortune, health, happiness, protection. The prayer flags are very sacred, because they contain texts from the holy sutras termed as 'mantras' and symbols that should be respected. Hence the painted or printed objects and colours are of great values to humanity.*

*Key words : Sacred prayer Flags, Symbols, Colours*

---

## Introduction

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines symbolism as an art of practice of using symbols that expresses the intangible aspects. Art is a part of life an activity that has meaning and can be expressed in various ways. All aspects of religion have symbolic values. Buddhist religion is no exception.

## Buddhist prayers flags

The sacred prayer flags are not just a pretty coloured piece of cloths that have strange writings. Prayer flags are considered auspicious device that is said to mingle with the energy of the wind, and harmonize the surrounding environment. It is believed to bring about happiness and good fortune among all living beings.

Encyclopedia Britannia views, "When people settled and gathered together for

common purpose, they probably began to use some objects as a symbol denoting common sentiments as a medium of common force."

## History of the intangible beliefs associated with the prayer flags

An interview with Vikshu Ugesen (White Monastery, Baudha) was of the opinion that the history of the prayer flags dates back to thousands of year. Its origin started during the pre-Buddhist era. The intangible beliefs exist that the Shamanistic Bonpo priests during pre-Buddhist era, used either plain or coloured cloth flags with symbols for the purpose of healing while conducting ritual oriented ceremonies.

The Buddhist religions of Tibet were oral traditions; writing was apparently limited to government bookkeeping. On the other hand the very word "Bonpo" means – "one who recites magical formulas." Even

if no writing was added to the plain strips of cloth it is likely that the Bonpos painted sacred symbols on them. (Dian 2003 ) Some symbols seen on Buddhist prayer flags today undoubtedly have Bonpo origins, their meaning now enhanced with the deep significance of Vajrayana Buddhist philosophy.

Local belief exists that the Nepali sutras were written on cloth termed as banners and were spread to other areas as ' prayer flags' ( Baker, Prayer Flags, p 13)

There are stories now termed as myths relate that Lord Gautam Buddha's teachings were written on the banners and then carried to different regions, and it reached Tibet and developed as flags by 1040 CE ( Common Era) and its printing on cloths began by Atisha 1054 and spread to Tibet and Nepal.

There are tales that the monks carried banners of Buddha's teachings while they travelled, to show that they believed in 'ahimsa'.

Another interesting legend is that in order to pacify the free flowing aggressive spirits the King of Tibet invited Guru Padmasmbava who was able to control majority spirits but few still remained semi-controlled. It is said some of the mantras on these flags were composed by Guru Padmasmbava himself to pacify the spirits from doing evil. (Wise, 2002)

### **Text on the Buddhist prayer flags**

In the 7th century King Stron Tsen Gampo sent his ministers to learn Sanskrit and the Tibetan script. The text inscribed or written on it are of three categories: Mantra, Sutras and Prayers.

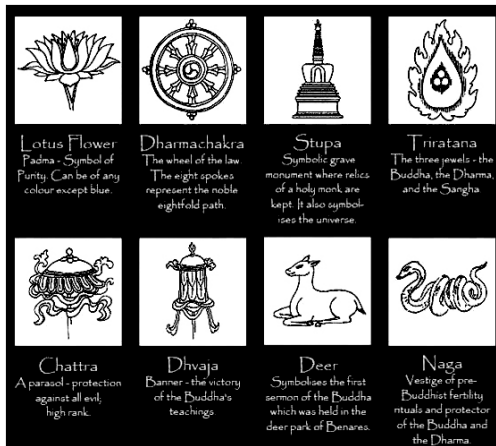
Mantras are power laden syllabus that



can affect the cosmos while Sutras are directly obtained from Buddha in course of discourse. One short form of Sutra is Dharani (powerful magical formulas). Example praises to the twenty-one Taras. The long life flag and the white umbrella are based on sutra. While prayers comprises of all other texts written on the flags.

### **Symbolic art on Buddhist prayer flags**

Symbols have deeper meaning and attached intangible beliefs, than their mere outer creativity. Buddhist religion and the associated prayer flags are no exception. The painted or printed flags are not only pretty piece of coloured cloths. It has interesting intangible beliefs attached to it.



## The eight auspicious artistic symbols and others portrayed on the flags

**Umbrella/Parasol/Chattrā:** made on the prayer flags and it symbolizes as the protector from all evils.

**Treasure Vase:** symbolizes the fulfillment of spiritual and material wishes.

**Golden Fish:** brings about happiness and being saved from the sea of suffering.

**Lotus:** denotes symbol of purity and spiritual enfoldments.

**Conch Shell:** depicts or symbolizes enlightened teachings of Lord Buddha.

**Endless Knot:** symbolizes meditative mind and knowledge.

**Victory Banner:** denotes victory of wisdom over ignorance and overcoming of obstacles.

**Dharma wheels/Dharma Chakra:** denotes the eight fold paths of Buddha.

Beside the eight auspicious symbols one can see other symbols such as:

**Dhvaja:** symbolizes victory of Buddha's teachings

**Deer:** symbolizes the first preaching of Buddha held in the deer park at Saranath.

**Naga:** symbolizes pre-Buddhist fertility rituals and it is regarded as the protector of Buddha and Dharma.

**Triratna:** denotes Buddha, Dharma and Samgha.

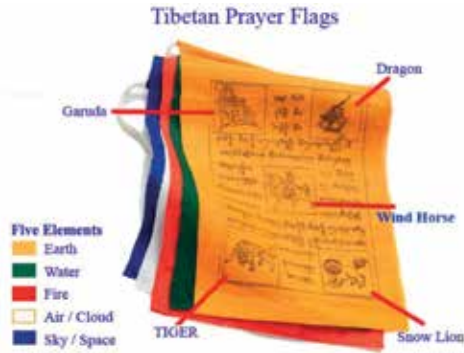
**Stupa:** symbolizes the universe, and grave where the relics of the holy one are placed, and therefore, from 'Chita' emerged the Chaitya. (Clark)

The other symbols painted or printed on the flags and the Intangible aspects attached are :

- The Wind Horse (Lung-ta)
- The Eight Auspicious Symbols (Tashi Targe)
- The Vajra (Dorje)
- The Four Dignities
- The Union of Opposites (Mithun Gyulgyal)
- Deities and Enlightened Beings

### The Wind Horse (Lung-ta)

The wind horse is a mythical creature, from pre-Buddhist era, that could fly faster than the wind. Lung-ta is uplifting life force (energy). The wind horse is painted or printed on the centre of the flag. The outside corners of the flag are guarded by four animals Garuda, Dragon, Tiger and Snow Lion. This is the most favorite of the prayer flags. This flag denotes 'wish fulfilling jewel of enlightenment'. It symbolizes good fortune. The intangible belief exists that if the Lung-ta is good then good



opportunities comes one's way, but if Lung-ta is low then one has to face many obstacles. The belief persists that the wind Horse carries away the obstacles and brings good fortune no-wonder it is regarded as the 'Wish-Fulfilling Jewel'. It is further believed that the speed of the wind and the strength of the mythical horse helps to carry the prayers from earth to heaven.



## The eight auspicious symbols (Tashi Targye)

The eight auspicious symbols comprise of umbrella/parasol/chattras, treasure vase, golden fish, conch shell, endless knot, lotus, victory banner, and dharma chakra. These eight symbols are of great value to the Buddhists and Tibetans. These eight symbols have been mentioned in the ancient Pali sutra and other religious Buddhist texts. These eight symbols signify good fortune and protect us from evil.

**The Vajra (Dorje):** Vajra is another auspicious symbol of the Buddhism that is painted or printed on the prayer flags. In the Buddhist religious sutra Vajra symbolizes indestructibility. Sutras refer

to it as the 'true reality'. It is believed to be the essence of everything that exists. The Buddhists believe that this pure emptiness is imperishable.

**The four dignities:** The four dignities on the four corners of the prayer flags are Garudas, Tiger, Dragon and the Snow Lion. with the Wind Horse on the center. The Buddhist sutra view that these dignities signify qualities like awareness, vision, confidence, joy, humility and power that are necessary for enlightenment.

Garuda represents the elements of fire and it symbolizes strength and it is a protector against negative forces of the Naga spirits that may cause disease.

Dragon on the flag save-guards people from slander and helps to improve their reputation.

Snow Lion is painted or printed towards the East corner of the flag. It is said to represent joy and happiness and free mind.

Tiger is depicted on the southern corner of the flag and it symbolizes, confidence, discipline and modesty.

### **The union of opposites (Mithun Gyulgyal)**

The union of two opposite's shows Garuda and Snow Lion who were mortal enemies were joined with Snow Lion's body and Garuda's head and wings. This was a symbol to harmonize the environment. These unions of opposites are depicted on the victory banner to remove disharmony and disagreement.

### **Deities and enlightened beings**

In the Buddhist religious texts it has been mentioned that in Vajrayani Buddhism deities are not gods but are represented as aspects of enlightened mind. The enlightened mind is based on the three aspects compassion, wisdom and power basically represented by Avaloketshwor, Vajrapani and Manjushree. Beside these the sacred Buddhist flags may have paintings or prints denoting Gautama.

Buddha, Padmasambava and Milerpa. The enlightened beings on the flags spread good feelings, peace and harmony. (Wise, 20020)

### **Symbolic colours on Buddhist prayer flags**

The coloured Buddhist Prayer flags of red, blue, yellow, green and white are not



just pretty adornments but are of great symbolic values.

The five colours are associated with five elements earth, sky, fire, water and air. The red colour denotes fire, blue represents sky and space, green water, yellow earth and white symbolizes air, wind and cloud.

Blue signifies loving kindness, peace and universal kindness. Yellow denotes the middle path, avoiding the extremes, and emptiness. Red represents blessings of practices, achievements, fortune, wisdom and dignity. White denotes dharma and purity and orange colour signifies teachings of Buddha and wisdom.

The Buddhist texts also associates these colours with "Pancha Dhyani Buddha" – Vairochana, Akshobhaya, Amitabha, Ratnasambhava, Amoghasiddhi.

Vairochana denotes space and is depicted in white colour and occupies the center place

Amoghashiddhi represents air and is shown in green colour and occupies the

northern niche of the stupa.

Amitabha symbolizes fire and is depicted in red colour and has placement on the western niche of the stupa.

Ratnasambhava denotes earth and is depicted in gold or yellow colour and occupies the southern niche of the stupa.

Akshoybhaya represents water and is depicted in blue colour and occupies the eastern niche of the stupa. (Clark, 2008)

**Blue with red border prayer flag:** The blue and red border prayer flag has its own symbolic value. It denotes good health and long life (Tsa La Nam Sum). This prayer flag portrays the deities of long life: Amitayus (Buddha of limitless life), White Tara (peaceful health), and Vijaya (victorious protection). The text on it has many prayers and mantras for health. This appears on the blue vertical print flags

**White with blue border prayer flag:** White with blue border prayer flag raises good fortune by purifying negative karma. It has Vajrasattva and consort in the center with the Four Dignities in the corners.

There are prayers dedicated to the five Buddha Families, Vajrasattva, Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, Vajrapani, Tara, and Guru Rinpoche. It also has repetitions of Vajrasattva's hundred syllable mantra. This is dedicated to Vajrasattva and is said to purify one's karma.

**Red with yellow border prayer flag:** Sampa Lhundrup – Wish Fulfillment Flag. In the center sits Guru Rinpoche showing the gesture that subdues negative forces. The text is the short version of Padmasambhava's Prayer of

Spontaneous accomplishment for quick wish fulfillment.

**Green with yellow border prayer flag:** Green and yellow border prayer flag is praise to the twenty-one Taras – Compassion, with Green Tara, in the center that represents the active energy of compassion she is considered as a mother who offers aid and protection. The texts are the invocation to the twenty-one Taras - each portraying a different aspect of compassion.

**Yellow with green border Prayer Flag:** The yellow with green border prayer flag denotes Gyaltsan Semo ~ Victory over Obstacles. The texts on the flags are associated with mantra or invocations for Victory. There are also mantras for Padmasambhava, and Tara - ending with 12 year symbols (a complete cycle), so as to make the Victorious energy cyclic. In the center flies the Wind Horse of good fortune with the corners protected by the uplifting energy of the 'Four Dignities'.

Beside all this there are pole flags also termed as 'tall flags' (Dar-Cho). The flags come in the traditional five colors with borders and "tongues" (streamers). All the pole flags and their tongues are hemmed for durability.

In conclusion it can be said that when raising prayer flags one must have pure, good feelings and proper motivation. If an individual tries to put up the flag with an ego-centered attitude such as "I will benefit from doing this" then the benefits obtained will be small. If the attitude is "May all beings everywhere receive benefit and find happiness," the virtue generated will increase the power of the prayers.

Both Buddhist including Tibetan considers prayer flags to be very sacred, because they contain texts from the holy sutras termed as 'mantras' and symbols that should be respected. The prayer flags should not be placed on the ground or thrown away as trash. An interview with Vikshu Ugensen said that while disposing of old a prayer flag, it must be burnt; so that the smoke may carry their blessings to the heaven. Thus it can be concluded that there is symbolism of art and colour within the painted and printed sacred flag.

### References

- Bernard, Theos, 1939/2007, Penthouse of Gods, a Pilgrimage into the Heart of Tibet & Sacred City of Lhasa, NY Publishing House.
- Barker, Dian (2003). Tibetan Prayer Flags. London, Connections Book Publishing House
- Timothy, Clark, 2008, Radiant Heart, The Prayer Flag Tradition, NY, Prayer flag.com.
- Tad Wise, 2002, Blessings on the Winds, Mystery & Meaning of Tibetan Prayers Flag, San Francisco, CA.
- [www.sacredflags.com](http://www.sacredflags.com)



### **Dr. Poonam Rajya Laxmi Rana**

*Dr. Poonam Rajya Laxmi Rana is an Associate Professor in the Department of Nepalese History, Culture and Archaeology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal.*

*She holds Masters Degree in Sociology and Environment and Ecology and Doctorate in Nepalese History Culture and Archaeology.*

*She has participated in various National and International Seminars and Conferences.*