

A few words about symbols, and composite symbols, as seen in Tibetan Buddhist spiritual art

Symbols belong to the earliest strata of the human mind and communication. They speak to us directly, if we are attuned to them, or when other factors are in place, such as having an affinity with what they express.

If we unlock the meaning of a symbol, it can be said that sometimes it happens spontaneously, right away, and at other times, we need to meditate on the symbol for it to reveal itself to us. It's very clear when this happens. An understanding that was not there a moment before appears in the mind directly, and non-verbally, and it is something we understand with our whole self.

Following that, we may try to express the meaning in words, and at times this is easy to do, just like we were describing our surroundings, or a conversation we overheard, or someone's appearance.

Sometimes symbols take longer to reveal themselves to us. This can come as a surprise. We may have been in its presence for years, when one day, we see something new. It's poetic. It's mysterious and wonderful.

We can also say that images that belong to a certain deep level can be meditated on and learned from for years and decades, and even for our whole lives.

Now, a composite image is something different in that each part of a Thangka, {a Tibetan Buddhist painting or tapestry} for example, has its own meaning. Together, the symbols are mutually illuminating.

The chapters in a book, or the verses of a song, or the photographs in an essay are each unique, but together they can express a meaning that is more than the sum of its parts, and more powerful, miraculously.

The different elements together can add to and enrich each other. All this becomes explicitly clear. There is an organic, inner unity to what thankas and religious art communicate.

Take for example the image of the Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom.

His most prominent feature is always that he holds aloft a sword. Often this is a flaming sword, which places it in another category altogether. We know right away that we are in a mythological realm when we see something markedly different, such as this.

Generally, there are other features that compliment the meaning of the flaming sword of liberating wisdom.

Fire itself is a universal symbol of light, and purification, of passion and intensity, and power. It is manifest strength and confidence.

When this is part of the sword held by Manjushri, it speaks of his utmost dedication to illuminating the Path of liberation, everywhere it is needed.

He has a serene look, confident, poised, and is often portrayed as being orange in color.

There is dispassion also to Manjushri, that allows for clear seeing and effective action.

Orange is the sky after sunrise, before it is at its zenith. There is the energy of the morning, and exhilaration, renewal and clear vision.

He wears jewels, and silks, in the manner of royalty, expressing self knowledge, dignity and self assurance. This is sometimes called 'Vajra pride'.

At times, Manju will be seated on a tiger, and holding the stem of a lotus, upon which rests a beautifully bound volume of The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines.

All of this we can sense is *of one meaning*. The sword, the flames, the serene visage, his color, the tiger and the Book representing all of the Buddha's teachings on liberation.

Taken one at a time, any one symbol can communicate all of this meaning, but together, the organically related imagery can have greater clarity and strength of expression, and can be understood more easily.

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It should be added that there is something beyond the symbol, and that is its meaning.

A well known verse in the Diamond Sutra says,

*Someone who looks for me in form or seeks me in sound is on a mistaken path and cannot see the Tathagata...*

{Verse 25}

The very next verse, less often quoted or commented on says,

*Do not think that when one gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, one needs to see all objects of mind as nonexistent, cut off from life. Please do not think in that way...*

Though it seems to be saying the opposite of the preceding verse, it actually compliments it, and fulfills it. We are not left with no form, but with form that is not grasped, and that is translucent, form in its fullness, the fullness of life. We had to go beyond our simple concepts of what is here, and when we do, there is profound interdependence, there is light,

*the universe in a grain of sand,  
and heaven in a wild flower...*

as the poet and seer William Blake said...