

## THE LOTUS SYMBOL IN PALI TRADITION

By Carl Olson

*The lotus is of great significance in Hindu mythology and Buddhism. Hindu deities like Visnu, Brahma, Suriya and Sri are associated with it in one way or another. In Buddhist literature and art, all Buddhas are depicted sitting on the lotus flower in the flower lotus position and Bodhisattvas e.g. Avalokitesvara (Kuan Yin) standing on it.*

*Carl Olson says that the lotus, because of its watery environment and spotless qualities, is a symbol not only of Tathagata (Lord Buddha), a sakadagamin (once-returner) or an anagamin (non-returner) but also of spiritual progress and enlightenment. He concludes, "The unfolding of the lotus is symbolic of the dawn of enlightenment and the victory over ignorance. It represents the wisdom of Nibbana, the aspiring monk, and the various levels of human existence."*

---Ed.

From Hindu mythology, one learns that from the golden lotus on Visnu's forehead appeared the goddess Sri. In another episode, a lotus stalk arose from Visnu's navel which gave birth to the god Brahma. In sculpture Visnu is often depicted holding a lotus-flower in one of his four hands. In post-Vedic literature Surya, the sun god, is represented as standing on a red lotus flower. Besides its importance in Hindu religion, the lotus-flower plays a prominent role in Mahayana Buddhist literature and art; it is especially associated with the Bodhisattva. The purpose of this paper is to examine the symbol of the lotus in the earlier Pali Buddhist tradition. It will be demonstrated that much of the later symbolic significance of the lotus in Mahayana Buddhism is prefigured in the Pali tradition.

The lotus is not just any lovely product of nature; it possesses a mysterious power. If used in conjunction with medicines, the lotus can cure a person of illness. It is reported that it helped to cure Sariputta of fever; Sariputta was an important early disciple of the Buddha. Thus from an early period in the Buddhist tradition the lotus had a magical quality.

The lotus is a plant which grows upwards from the bottom of a lake or pond and slowly ascends to the surface. Thus the lotus is born in the water, it comes to full maturity in the water, eventually rises to the surface and stands unspotted by the water. As such, it serves as a symbol of the Tathagata (the one thus come),

who is born and matures in the world, passes beyond the world, and eventually emerges untainted by the world. In this sense, the lotus is a symbol not only of the Tathagata but also of upward action, spiritual growth and attainment, and detachment from the world.

The spiritual development of human beings is represented by the lotus. There are beings with a little or much dust in their eyes. Others possess acutely dull faculties. In other words, some individuals are more benighted than others. Just as some lotus-flowers thrive while immersed in water, others reach the surface of the water, and some rise undefiled out of the water.

At times, the lotus beneath the water is symbolic of a bhikkhu in the third state of trance. Just as the lotus flourishes beneath the water and is saturated by cool water, a monk in the third trance state is saturated with joy. The bhikkhu in this state is serene and self-possessed.

In the Sangiti Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, four types of recluses are enumerated: the unshaken recluse; the blue lotus recluse; the white lotus recluse; and the exquisite recluse. I want to concentrate on the significance of the blue and white lotus recluses.

The blue lotus recluse is equivalent to a once-returner (*sakadagamin*):

‘Herein a monk, by utterly wearing out three fetters and by weakening lust, anger and delusion, is a once-returner. Coming back just once more to this world he makes an end of ill-will.’

The blue lotus recluse is assured of no bad rebirths and is also assured of enlightenment within one more lifetime. He is free from the three fetter (*samyojana*) – delusions of self, doubts about the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha and trust in the efficacy of rituals and good works. If one places the colour blue within the Indian cultural context, one discovers that since indigo-blue is so durable, blue is the colour of faithfulness. Furthermore, the blue lotus recluse contemplates the rise and fall of the five-grasping groups (*upadanakkhandha*), but he does not experience the eight deliverances (*vimokhas*).

The white lotus recluse is equal to the degree of sanctification represented by a non-returner (*anagamin*):

‘Herein a monk, by utterly wearing out the five fetters which cause rebirth here, is apparitionally born, destined there to pass utterly away, of a nature not to return from that world.’

The non-returner destroys the initial three fetters plus sensuality and ill-will. The white lotus recluse is assured of enlightenment during his current lifetime.

He will be reborn in another world and never return to the present cycle of suffering. Like the blue lotus recluse, he contemplates the rise and fall of the five-grasping groups, but he goes beyond the level of spiritual attainment of the blue lotus recluse by personally experiencing the eight deliverances.

In many world religions, white is the colour of purity. The lotus is rooted and grows in the slimy mud at the bottom of a pond. As it moves upwards and blossoms forth, the white lotus is untainted by the mud of the earth. Likewise, the successful monk emerges clean and purified of the world's uncleanness.

The lotus is a symbol of spiritual progress and enlightenment. It grows in the maternal, primeval procreative water. The water represents the pre-formal potentiality for spiritual enlightenment. It is the unformed from which a new form, new being or new life can emerge. Within the water, the lotus represents its generative organ; it is the energy and force inherent in the water. The water – the symbol of life – gives new life; the lotus is nourished by the water, but it eventually rises above the water and symbolically transcends it. Not a drop of water can cling to the leaves of the lotus which becomes totally detached like the enlightened saint. The gradual rising of the lotus is an act of creation, the emerging of a new being.

The significance of the lotus as a preeminent symbol in Mahayana Buddhism is prefigured in the Pali tradition. In other words, the seeds of its later importance are rooted in the Pali tradition and in early Hinduism. For example, a symbol of the atman is the lotus of the heart. For one who knows the truth, evil action does not adhere to him, just as water does not cling to the leaf of a lotus-flower. And from its association with the Hindu goddesses, the lotus connotes the supramundane character of the enlightened ones of the Mahayana tradition. The unfolding of the lotus is symbolic of the dawn of enlightenment and the victory over ignorance. It represents the wisdom of Nibbana, the aspiring monk, and the various levels of human existence.

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