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ON THE METHODOLOGY OF INTERPRETATION OF BUDDHIST SYMBOLISM

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To date attempts at interpreting the symbolism of the Buddhist "Intentional Language" have lacked adequate methodological foundation. To provide such a foundation, the nature of Indian symbolism in general is examined and general principles underlying it are identified. Against that background, typical examples from the Intentional Language—the *dhyāni* Buddha *maṇḍala* and the *cakras*—are then examined, and are found to reduce essentially to a system of five symbolic groups. It is argued that the ultimate referent of this fivefold symbolic system is likely to be an integrated set of five meditative techniques or resultant supernormal mental states or powers, and a method is proposed whereby such a set could be identified.

Throughout the past few decades the interpretation of religious symbolism has attracted increasing interest. Particular attention has been paid to Buddhist symbolism, because of the recognized existence in Buddhism of an intentionally created system of symbols serving as the language of an esoteric tradition. Tantric texts frequently mention an 'intentional language' (*saṁdhā-bhāṣā*) or 'twilight language' (*saṁdhyā-bhāṣā*),[1] by means of which *gurus* handed down essential teachings to certain chosen disciples.

Most of the symbols comprising this Intentional Language have been drawn from the stock common to all Indian religions; however, they appear to have been assigned specific meanings over and above their ancient natural associations.[2] For example, the lotus as an archaic natural symbol denotes birth or purity (see Bosch, 1960, pp. 122-124); but in the *mantra*, *Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ Hrīḥ*, and in the *maṇḍala*, where it has a fixed place as the emblem of the *dhyāni* Buddha Amitābha, the lotus is one of a discrete set of five symbols and appears to have a special meaning, an intentional meaning.[3] The interpretation of natural symbols has been undertaken successfully by a number of scholars, using a comparative methodology and drawing on the findings of psychology, anthro-

pology, linguistics, and philosophy. However, attempts to discover the intentional meaning of Buddhist symbols have not been satisfactory.[4]

The first to attempt to decipher the Intentional Language were some early theosophists and converts to Buddhism. They believed that all would be revealed if one became the disciple of a *guru*; and their interpretations were often little more than intuitive guesswork. If this early approach represents one extreme, the pendulum now appears to have swung in the opposite direction, towards the view that the only valid way to examine these symbols is by using the tools of critical, analytical western scholarship unencumbered by 'mystical' practices. However, if, as seems likely, the symbols of the Intentional Language refer to altered states of consciousness, psychic powers, or advanced meditative techniques, it is hard to see how a scholar totally unfamiliar with such states, powers, or techniques could ever *interpret* the symbols—as opposed to discussing their origin and historical development. A partial compromise between these two extremes is to be found in the works of Agehananda Bharati and the Lama Anagarika Govinda. However, while Bharati rightly adopts a cautious approach, Govinda ambitiously attempts to explain the full range of Buddhist symbolism with little regard for methodology.[5]

To be of any value, an attempt at interpreting the Intentional Language must be preceded by a careful consideration of how the problem might be approached. The purpose of this article is therefore to develop a rational methodology for the interpretation of the Intentional Language, and to show how that methodology can be applied.[6]

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF INDIAN SYMBOLISM

To begin with it is necessary to make some observations on the nature of Indian symbolism in general. Indian religious thought is characterized by a tendency to seek homologies wherever possible. In Vedic times parallels were drawn between microcosm and macrocosm, between man and universe. By the time of the Brāhmaṇas, this development had reached a peak of scholastic complexity (see, for example, Hopkins, 1971 : 33-34). As the practice of homologizing developed, parallels were discovered not only between individual entities but between *sets* of entities. For example, the female/male polarity was discovered to have numerous parallels throughout the universe. The moon was female and the sun was male, the water element was female and the fire element male, and so on through a great diversity of objects, including the parts of the body, the stages in the breathing cycle, and even the letters of the

alphabet. Thus a female group comprising the moon, water, the left side of the body, the out-breath, the vowels, etc. stood contrasted with a male group comprising the sun, fire, the right side, the in-breath, the consonants, etc. Mental states and doctrinal notions were included, so that, for example, in Tantric Buddhism the principles of *prajñā* and *upāya* were identified as belonging to the female group respectively (see Wayman, 1962).

Following recognition of the two basic groups whose type members were the contrasting female and male, further groups were introduced, generating progressively more detailed analyses of the natural world. The basic polarity suggested a point of balance or union—whence the triads female/male/androgyne; left/right/centre; night/day/twilight; etc. For each existing pair a third member had to be found, which could be assigned to the new group, the 'balance group'. In the case of the vowels (female) and consonants (male), the point of balance was identified as the *anusvārā*.[7] In the case of the moon and sun it was identified as the eclipses or, more commonly, light (see Wayman, 1962, p. 92).[8] This process of extending sets of equivalent entities continued, yielding sets with four, five, and more members. There were four geometrical shapes, five elements, five colours, etc.; and these sets were equated item by item. For example, the triangle or cone, the third of the shapes, was equated with fire, the third of the elements, which again was equated with red, the third of the colours (see, for example, Govinda, 1960, pp. 185-6).

The process of extending and equating sets was attended by certain difficulties. The set of five elements, once it had become established, was normally listed in the sequence earth, water, fire, air, space; and from the time of the Pali Suttas to that of the Tantras there had existed a standard listing of four colours : blue, yellow, red, white.[9] It was recognized that red and white could appropriately be paired with fire and space respectively, so an extra colour had to be added to pair with air. This extra colour was variousiy smoky, black, or green, of which only smoky can have been chosen for its natural associations. Again, the second colour, yellow, was naturally associated with the first element, earth, while the first colour, blue, was naturally associated with the second element, water. The equivalences earth = yellow, and water = blue, were therefore adopted, even though they conflicted with the traditional listing of the colours.[10]

COMPOSITION OF MAṆDALA AND CAKRAS

Four-and five-membered sets are conspicuous in the Buddhist Tantric tradition. The Buddhists recognize four *cakras*,[11] and their *dhyāni*

Buddha *maṇḍala* has five cells;[12] and in each of these systems several different four- and five-membered sets are brought together. Since it is widely recognized that both the *cakras* and the *maṇḍala* are in some way symbolic, we take these two systems as our principal examples in the following discussion. Both *cakras* and *maṇḍala* have been adequately described by various authors (e.g. Govinda, 1960); it therefore suffices here to summarize their symbolic composition. This is done in Tables 1 and 2.

It is commonly assumed, both in traditional texts and in modern accounts, that all of the objects in any particular *cakra* or in any particular cell of the *maṇḍala* somehow belong together, forming in effect a unitary composite symbol. For example, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bar-do thos-grol)*, describing the series of visions seen by the dying person on successive days— which are in fact successive cells of the *maṇḍala*—says, for the fourth day or western cell(Fremantle, 1975, p. 46):

> On the fourth day, a red light, the purified element of fire, will shine, and at the same time Blessed Amitābha will appear before you from the red western Realm, the Blissful. His body is red in colour, he holds a lotus in his hand and sits on a peacock throne, embracing his consort Pāṇḍaravāsinī. The red light of the *skandha* of perception in its basic purity, the wisdom of discrimination, brilliant red, adorned with discs of light, luminous and clear, sharp and bright, will come from the heart of Amitābha and his consort and pierce your heart so that your eyes cannot bear to look at it....

Here it is clearly taken for granted that the colour red belongs to Amitābha, that the peacock is Amitābha's *vāhana*, and so on. In his description of the *cakras* Dasgupta (1958, p. 46) says : "Thus the *nirmāṇa-cakra* in the navel region stands for the element of earth, represented by the syllable '*e*' and presided over by the goddess Locanā...." Here it is implied that the naval *cakra*, the element earth, the syllable '*e*' etc., together constitute a single complex symbol, or are symbolically equivalent.

DISCREPANCIES IN MAṆḌALA AND CAKRAS

A necessary first step towards an interpretation of the *cakras* or *maṇḍala* must therefore be to analyse the relationships existing among their various component symbols. Both *cakras* and *maṇḍala* contain (1) several five-membered sets of symbols : five elements, five colours, five *dhyāni* Buddhas, etc.; and (2) associations or groupings of symbols from different sets, for example in the western cell of the *maṇḍala*

TABLE 1

COMPOSITION OF THE MAṆDALA

Direction	Element	Colour	Dhyāni Buddha	Emblem	Mudrā	Bīja	Vāhana	Skandha	Wisdom
centre	space	white	Vairocana	wheel	*dharmacakra*	*Oṃ*	lion	*vijñāna*	*dharmadhātu*
north	air	green	Amoghasiddhi	*viśvavajra*	*abhaya*	*Āḥ*	*garuḍa*	*saṃskāra*	all-accomplishing
west	fire	red	Amitābha	lotus	*dhyāna*	*Hrīḥ*	peacock	*saṃjñā*	discriminating
south	earth	yellow	Ratnasambhava	jewel	*varada*	*Traṃ*	horse	*vedanā*	equality
east	water	blue	Akṣobhya	*vajra*	*bhūmisparśa*	*Hūṃ*	elephant	*rūpa*	mirror-like

Note : This table is based largely on Dasgupta (1958 : 121).

TABLE 2

COMPOSITION OF THE CAKRAS

Cakra	Dhyāni Buddha	Bīja	Element
crown	Vairocana	*Oṃ*	air
throat	Amitābha	*Āḥ*	fire
heart	Akṣobhya	*Hūṃ*	water
navel			earth

Note: This is only one of many different tables that could be drawn up for the *cakras* (see Dasgupta, 1958 : 146-153; Snellgrove, 1959 : 38-39).

a grouping of fire, red, Amitābha, etc. However, examination of the various combinations reveals numerous inconsistencies. Some of the groupings found in the *maṇḍala* differ from those in the *cakras*. For example, in the *maṇḍala* the *bīja Āḥ* is associated with Amoghasiddhi, whereas in the *cakras* it is associated with Amitābha. Each *dhyāni* Buddha has a female consort, who also has an associated element. In the *maṇḍala* we find that this element is identical with that associated with the *dhyāni* Buddha in three out of the five cases, but is different in the remaining two; Akṣobhya's element is water while that of his consort Locanā is earth; and Ratnasambhava's element is earth while that of his consort Māmakī is water (see Snellgrove, 1959, p. 31; Govinda, 1960, p. 121; Dasgupta, 1958, p. 111). In the *cakras* the converse situation prevails : heart *cakara* contains Akṣobhya, Māmakī, and water, so the correspondences between *dhyāni* Buddha and element are correct, but Akṣobhya has the wrong consort (see Dasgupta, 1958, p. 150; Snellgrove, 1959, p. 28).

Another kind of discrepancy is revealed when one examines the properties of the symbols brought together in any one cell of the *maṇḍala*. In the western cell Amitābha and his emblem the lotus are recognized as female symbols and equated with *prajñā* yet Amitābha is red and associated with the element fire, both of which are male symbols. In the eastern cell Akṣobhya and his emblem the *vajra* are recognized as male symbols and equated with *upāya*—yet Akṣobhya is blue and associated with water, both female symbols (see Wayman, 1962, pp. 87-89; Snellgrove, 1959, p. 24). Similar internal contradictions are evident in the *cakaras*.

These discrepancies are not easy to reconcile with the widespread assumption, noted above, that the collection of symbols present in any *maṇḍala* cell or *cakra* constitutes a unitary composite symbol. If any sense is to be made of the *maṇḍala* and *cakra* symbolism, these discrepancies must be accounted for.[13]

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR DISCREPANCIES

The most obvious way of accounting for such discrepancies would be to assume that the texts are corrupt. This is the explanation resorted to by Evans-Wentz (1960, p. 124, note 2; 1967, p. 305, note 1) on several occasions. Another possible explanation is that, as Eliade (1969, p. 250) suggests, the chief purpose of the Intentional Language was "to project the *yogin* into the 'paradoxical situation' indispensable to his training." The discrepancies would then be accounted for as part of a deliberate attempt to confront the *yogin* with contradictions. An explanation offered by Govinda (1960, pp. 180-181) is that different arrangements of the symbols were favoured by different schools of meditation and even by different meditators.[14] But this is hardly an explanation, because there does exist a traditional distribution of the *dhyāni* Buddha, *bījas*, etc. among the *cakras* and *maṇḍala* cells. A more elaborate means of accounting for the discrepancies is provided by Wayman's (1962, p. 90) distinction between "basic time correspondences" and "fruitional time correspondences". The implication of this is that the meditative experience so alters one's constitution that symbolic correspondences applying before the meditative practice is taken up no longer hold after it has been successfully completed.[15]

There is, however, a further possible explanation for the observed discrepancies, namely that the way in which the symbols are grouped together in the different *maṇḍala* cells and *cakras* is partly or totally lacking in symbolic significance. This last possibility, which does not appear to have been considered seriously by previous investigators, proves on examination to have much in its favour.

The number of symbol sets contained in any particular representation of the *maṇḍala* is variable. One or more of the sets usually depicted may be omitted; for example, a *maṇḍala* engraved on a brass plaque naturally lacks the set of colours, and in the extreme case, as in a representation of the *dhyāni* Buddha emblems around a *stūpa*, only one set is depicted. On the other hand, some versions of the *maṇḍala* contain more than the usual number of combined sets. For example, there exist representations of the *maṇḍala* in which the four geometrical shapes are included: the square, circle, traingle, and semicircle are assigned to the northern, eastern, southern, and western cells respectively.[16] These considerations suggest that the complexity of the *maṇḍala* may have resulted from a process of superimposing symbol sets which were formerly more or less independent of one another.

How this process could have come about can be seen by considering

the last-mentioned version of the *maṇḍala*, that in which the four shapes are included. It is widely recognized that these four shapes correspond symbolically with the first four of the five elements (see Govinda, 1960, pp. 185-186) The square, or its three-dimensional counterpart the cube, corresponds to earth, the circle or sppere corresponds to water, the traingle or cone corresponds to fire, and the semicircle or hollow hemisphere corresponds to air.[17] Consequently, that version of the *maṇḍala* in which the four shapes are included presents numerous further internal contradictions. The square corresponding to earth is in the northern cell with Amoghasiddhi, whose associated element is air; the triangle (fire) is in the southern cell with Ratnasambhava (earth); and the semicircle (air) is in the western cell with Amitābha (fire). Only in the eastern cell (water) and the central cell (space) is there agreement. Why then are the four shapes arranged as they are ? Clearly their arrangement is based on that of the four continents in the Indian cosmography. In the Indian world-map the *axis mundi*, Mount Meru, is surrounded by four continents : a square continent to the north, a circular one to the east, a triangular one to the south, and a semicircular one to the west. The southern continent is equated with India, which resembles it in being roughly triangular and located south of the Eurasian landmass.[18] This example of the addition of a symbol set without due attention to symbolic equivalences clearly has important implications for the interpretation of the *maṇḍala*. If in the southern cell of the *maṇḍala*, the triangle was brought together with the element earth, this was not done because that particular combination was not done because that particular combination was preferred as a particularly efficacious object for meditation, or as an accurate representation of the changes in consciousness that the meditator experiences; rather it was done simply because in Indian cosmography the continent in the south was triangular.

Similar reasoning may now be applied to the other contradictions observed in the *maṇḍala*. If in the western cell Amitābha, the passive, female-associated *dhyāni* Buddha, is inappropriately associated with red, the active, male-associated colour, this is probably because the set of *dhyāni* Buddhas and the set of colours were independently positioned in the cruciform arrangement of the *maṇḍala*. Originally the *dhyāni* Buddhas and the colours were independent of each other, and arranged according to quite different principles. In the case of the *dhyāni* Buddhas the factors determining positions relative to the campass points were (1) the association of Amitābha with the Western Paradise, and (2) the female/male/androgyne relationship existing among Amitābha, Akṣobhya

and Vairocana. In the case of the colours the principal factors were (1) the traditional listing blue, yellow, red, (green), white and (2) the *pradakṣiṇa* movement. When the two sets were superimposed, the symbolic equivalences were either disregarded or not known. Whether it was a case of superimposing two recognized cruciform paterns, or of fitting a recognized linear list of colours into an existing cruciform pattern of *dhyāni* Buddhas, the effect was the same : the resulting special groupings bore no connection with the original symbolic equivalences—exeept in the central cell. Because it would have been natural to place the 'highest' symbol of any set at the centre of the cruciform arrangement, the groupings of objects in the central cell almost certainly reflect symbolic equivalences.

This, then, is the most probable explanation for the contradictions found in the *maṇḍala* : the *maṇḍala* has resulted from a process of superimposing formerly independent sets of symbols which were, in some cases at least, arranged in different ways.

In the case of the *cakras* the situation is much the same, despite the greater simplicity of a linear arrangement. It has therefore to be recognized that the groupings of symbols found in the *maṇḍala* and *cakras* do not necessarily have symbolic significance; some of them at least have clearly resulted from a purely mechanical superimposition of formerly independent symbol sets. Only in the case of the central *maṇḍala* cell can it be assumed that the associated symbols are symbolically equivalent.

METHOD FOR ESTABLISHING ORIGINAL CORRESPONDENCES

Following the above conclusions, the next step in the analysis must be to isolate the several sets of symbols and determine the original and correct equivalences among them. For example, whereas one had formerely tended to speak of "Amitābha's *vāhana* the peacock," as if Amitābha and the peacock were symbolically equivalent, or somehow belonged together, one must now treat the two as members of independent sets. Amitābha belongs naturally in the 'water group', with the water element and other passive, female-associated symbols; the peacock, being a bird, rather suggests the air element. One must attempt, by thus referring to distinguishing natural properties and widely applicable traditional correspondences, to assign each component of the *maṇḍala* and *cakras* to one or another of the five symbolic groups, whose type members are the five elements. Of the sets in question, three, namely the elements, colours, and shapes, need no further analy-

sis, because the widely recognized equivalences among these three sets are in complete agreement with the evidence provided by their natural properties, thus leaving little room for doubt regarding their validity. For the remaining sets, the *dhyāni* Buddhas, emblems, *bījas*, *vāhanas*, and *mudrās*, the equivalences are as yet only incompletely established, as indicated in Table 3.

TABLE 3

SYMBOLIC EQUIVALENCES SO FAR ESTABLISHED

Element	Colour	Shape	Dhyāni Buddha	Emblem	Bīja	Vāhana	Mudrā
space	white		Vairocana	wheel	*Oṃ*	lion	*dharmacakra*
air	green	semicircle					
fire	red	triangle	Akṣobhya	*vajra*	*Hūṃ*		
water	blue	circle	Amitābha	lotus	*Āḥ*		
earth	yellow	square					

On the principle that all symbols in the central cell of the *maṇḍala* belong to the same symbolic group, it can be affirmed that Vairocana, the wheel emblem, the *bīja Oṁ*, the lion, and the wheel-turning *mudrā* are all symbolically equivalent; they all belong to the 'space group'. In addition, it has been noted that Amitābha, the lotus emblem, and the *bīja Āḥ*, as traditionally passive, female-associated symbols, belong naturally with water; while Akṣobhya, the *vajra*, and *Hūṃ*, as active male-associated symbols, belong with fire. It remains, then, to establish the symbolic status of *dhyāni* Buddhas (Ratnasambhava, Amoghasiddhi), two emblems (jewel, double *vajra*), two *bījas*, (*Traṃ*, *Hrīḥ*), four *vāhanas* (elephant, horse, peacock, *garuḍa*), and four *mudrās* (earth-touching, gift-bestowing, meditation, no-danger).

We begin by establishing the symbolic equivalences between the two unidentified *dhyāni* Buddhas, Ratnasambhava and Amoghasiddhi, and the two unidentified emblems, the jewel and the double *vajra*. A natural association between Ratnasambhava and the jewel is immediately apparent : the name "Ratna-sambhava" means "Jewel-birth". From this we conclude that Ratnasambhava and the jewel emblem belong to the same symbolic group. It follows that the one remaining *dhyāni* Buddha, Amoghasiddhi, belongs to the same symbolic group as the one remaining emblem, the double *vajra*.

It has now been demonstrated that each of the five emblems is symbolically equivalent to the *dhyāni* Buddha who is normally shown holding it, and whose cell it shares in the *maṇḍala*. In other words, it has

been demonstrated that the commonly accepted notion that the emblems *represent* the *dhyāni* Buddha is valid. One is therefore justified in speaking of 'Amoghasiddhi's emblem, the double *vajra*' in a way that one is probably *not* justified in speaking of 'Amoghasiddhi's colour green.' This does not quite complete the task of determining the symbolic equivalence of *dhyāni* Buddhas and emblems; for while Amitābha, Akṣobhya, and Vairocana are known to belong with the elements water, fire, and space respectively, and can thereby be assigned places in Table 3, the status of the remaining two *dhyāni* Buddhas and their emblems *vis-á-vis* the remaining two elements is still unclear. Neither Ratnasambhava with his jewel emblem nor Amoghasiddhi with his double *vajra* bears any evident resemblance to any of the elements, colours, or shapes. Nevertheless, in so far as the equivalences between all five *dhyāni* Buddhas and their emblems have been established, progress has been made.

Next we attempt to establish, in similar fashion, how Ratnasambhava and Amoghasiddhi are related to the two remaining *bījas*, *Traṃ* and *Hrīḥ*. In the absence of any information of the type that, for example, links Akṣobhya with *Hūṃ*, recourse must be had to less direct evidence. That most popular and important of all Buddhist *mantras*, *Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ Hrīḥ* (often abbreviated by omitting *Hrīḥ*), contains three of the five *bījas*, and its remaining two components are members of the set of emblems—*maṇi* = jewel, *padma* = lotus, The symbolic equivalences already established are then as follows :

Oṃ	=	Vairocana
Maṇi	=	Ratnasambhava
Padma	=	Amitābha
Hūṃ	=	Akṣobhya
Hrīḥ	=	?

If *Hrīḥ*, the one remaining component of the *mantra*, is equated with Amoghasiddhi, the one remaining *dhyāni* Buddha, the *mantra* becomes in effect a listing of the set of *dhyāni* Buddhas, and its great importance in the Tantric tradition is thereby explained.[19] Such a correlation between *mantra* and *maṇḍala* is in keeping with the nature of the Intentional Language in general, as an integrated, interlocking system rather than a collection of isolated fragments. Once we accept this identification of *Hrīḥ* with Amoghasiddhi, the remaining *bīja*, *Traṃ*, is thus automatically equated with Ratnasambhava.

The equivalences between *bījas* and *dhyāni* Buddhas are, then, as follows : *Oṃ*=Vairocana, *Āḥ*=Amitābha, *Hūṃ*=Akṣobhya, *Traṃ*=Ratnasambhava, *Hrīḥ*=Amoghasiddhi.[20] Of these, three are in accordance

with the associations which seem to be implied by the positions of the *bījas* and *dhyāni* Buddhas in the *maṇḍala*; the other two are not : *Oṃ*, *Hūṃ*, and *Traṃ* are symbolically equivalent to the *dhyāni* Buddhas whose cells they share; *Āḥ* and *Hrīḥ* are not (see Table 1). Here again the analysis remains incomplete, since the final step of establishing equivalences with the elements has yet to be achieved.

Next we examine the four unidentified *vāhanas*, the elephant, horse, peacock, and *garuḍa*, attempting first to establish connections with the elements. The elephant is frequently associated, both in nature and in Indian art and iconography, with water and lotuses (see, for example, Zimmer, 1962, pp. 102-109). Perhaps the best known example of this is in the Gaja-Lakṣmī icon, which depicts a pair of elephants pouring water over the head of the goddess Lakṣmī or Śrī from pitchers held in their trunks. We therefore identify the elephant as belonging to the water group.

The peacock, being a bird, is naturally associated with air; however, this is of little help here because the *garuḍa*, a creature that is half man, half bird, seems equally to belong with air. The horse does not suggest any of the elements. Comparison with sets other than the elements similarly reveals no natural correspondences. Mythological references, for example the fact that the *garuḍa* is well known for his enmity towards serpents, also fail to give any guidance. It might be noted that according to the Tibetan version of the world-map, the four great world-rivers spring from the mouths of four animals which are identical with four of the five *vāhanas* (see Pranavananda, 1949, p. 14; Govinda, 1966, p. 119); however, this cross-reference proves to be of no assistance either. We are forced, then, to make do with a very incomplete analysis of the *vāhanas* : the elephant belongs to the water group, the lion belongs to the space group, and either the peacock or the *garuḍa* belongs to the air group.

Finally, we consider the *mudrās* : earth-touching, gift-bestowing, meditation, and no-danger. The term 'earth-touching' suggests a connection with the earth element, but to infer symbolic equivalence on this basis would seem premature, in the light of the well-known mythological association of the *mudrā*. According to the tradition, the Bodhisattva Gotama assumed the earth-touching *mudrā* when, on the day before his enlightenment, he called on the earth goddess to bear witness to the merit he had acquired in former existences (see Snellgrove, 1978, p. 135). The earth goddess did so, and as a result Māra and his seductive daughters, who had been attempting to distract the meditating Bodhisattva, were forced to retire defeated.

All but one of the *mudrās* (the gifr-bestowing *mudrā*, which is said to

represent the Buddha's unbounded magnanimity) have such associations with the biography of the Buddha (see Saunders, 1960, p. 3, 43, 53, 55, 58). Those associations clearly have to be considered in determining the symbolic status of the *mudrās*. For example, the no-danger *mudrā* is associated with the occasion on which the Buddha subdued a stampeding elephant, which indicates that this *mudrā* belongs to a different symbolic group from the elephant. So one can at least conclude that the no-danger *mudrā* does *not* belong to the water group. The meditation *mudrā* is the one that the Bodhisattva first assumed on taking his seat beneath the Bodhi tree; he later abandoned it in favour of the earth-touching *mudrā* when Māra's attack became too threatening. This indicates that the meditation and earth-touching *mudrās* represent opposing forces of some kind.

Our attempt to identify the equivalences between the members of different symbolic sets has been only partially successful. Three of the *vāhanas* and four of the *mudrās* remain unidentified; and in the case of the *dhyāni* Buddhas, emblems, and *bījas*, only a partial identification has been achieved, since a connection with the elements and other sets has not been established. In spite of this incompleteness, the analysis is now far advanced for us to be able to proceed to the next stage in the methodology.

IDENTIFICATION OF ULTIMATE REFERENT

Having established the existence of five groups of symbolically equivalent entities, we are in a position to confront the central question : what do these five groups ultimately denote ? The tradition of an intentional language provides sufficient reason for believing that the groups do denote something beyond themselves. Given the status accorded the symbols in the Tantric tradition, it seems likely that the reference is either to some aspect of the Buddha's exoteric teaching as preserved in known texts, or to some esoteric teaching not found in the texts, or referred to only obliquely.

Various five-membered sets found in the exoteric teaching are explicitly associated with the *maṇḍala* cells and *cakras*, most notably the five *skandhas*, and the five wisdoms (Dasgupta, 1958, p. 87). It seems inherently unlikely that an exoteric teaching so frequently and clearly explained as the five *skandhas* should have been symbolized so cryptically. On the other hand, the five wisdoms are not at all clearly explained, and the possibility exists that it is these, or the means of attaining them, that the symbols denote. Or it may be that the reference is to some quite

different teaching that is nowhere explicitly dealt with in the texts. While the Buddha's Suttas discuss at length morality and basic meditation (e.g. *ānāpānasati*), they contain little about the final stages on the path to enlightenment. In particular, they consistently fail to make clear the nature of the meditative techniques whereby the Buddha acquired the three supernatural knowledges (*tevijjā*) that immediately preceded his enlightenment—the knowledge of former existences, the knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings, and the knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas* (see Thomas, 1951, p. 44; Mizuno, 1969, pp. 207-215). It is possible that this higher teaching, though being passed on to only a few *bhikkhus* capable of putting it into effect, gave rise to an esoteric tradition; and it could be to this that the five symbolic groups refer.

Evidence that the five groups may refer to meditative techniques practised by the Buddha has already been touched on. In the course of the symbolic analysis it was noted that four of the five *mudrās* refer to incidents in the Buddha's biography, some of which figure prominently in the account of his enlightenment. The meditation *mudrā* and earth-touching *mudrā* are associated respectively with Māra's attack and his subsequent defeat; and since all Buddhists recognize that the attack by Māra symbolizes the arising of distracting thoughts in the mind of the meditating Bodhisattva (Buddhadasa, 1974, p. 14), a link between the *mudrās* and meditation practice is established.

This is clearly the explanation for the difficulties encountered in placing symbols in Table 3. The parallel sets of elements, colours, and shapes date from a very early period and do not in themselves contain any hint of a connection with Buddhist doctrine. By contrast, the set of five *dhyāni* Buddhas with their *mudrās*, *bījas*, and *vāhanas*, is a later development and has the appearance of having been devised specifically in order to represent some aspect of the Buddha's teaching. If, for example, Ratnasambhava's jewel emblem cannot be found to resemble any element, colour, or shape, this is probably because it represents a stage in meditation practice and is connected with the elements, colours, and shapes only secondarily and indirectly. The emblems were not intended as symbols for the elements; the implied connection between emblems and elements is therefore bound to remain obscure until such time as the ultimate referent has been identified. In the case of the jewel emblem, what one may expect to find is that the set of five meditative stages, or whatever the symbols ultimately represent, includes one member which resembles on the one hand a jewel, and on the other hand one of the five elements. Until this ultimate referent has been identified, the place

of the jewel in Table 3 will remain unclear; and the same is to be expected of the double *vajra* and the remaining *vāhanas* and *mudrās*. Even where correspondences with the elements have been established, it is clearly with meditative practices that comparisons must be drawn at this advanced stage in the process of interpretation. For example, we have established that the elephant belongs with the water group; but we must now go on to take account of the fact that the Buddha likened the meditative practice of concentrating the mind to the process of taming a wild elephant (*Majjhima-nikāya*, iii, 125).

NEED FOR INVESTIGATION OF MEDITATIVE TECHNIQUES

Here we approach the crux of the interpretative process, the point at which the interpreter must begin to seek correspondences between the symbols and actual meditation practices, or whatever else is considered likely to be the ultimate referent. However far one manages to go with textual exegesis, reasoned analysis, and philosophical extrapolation, one must eventually come to a point where further progress in understanding the Intentional Language is possible only through actually experiencing, or at least clearly understanding, the practices or states to which the symbols refer. It is hardly to be expected that, having analysed, however carefully, the nature of the symbols, one will thereby come to understand what they represent; rather it is to be expected that, having examined the nature of the symbols and having experienced or clearly understood the practices or states they represent, one will then come to perceive the correspondences between the two.

In spite of this, one can, on the reasonable assumption that the characteristics of the Intentional Language as so for observed will apply also at this final level, make certain predictions regarding the nature of the ultimate referent. One can infer that it is likely to be an integrated set of five entities—meditative techniques, mental states, etc.—such that each member of the set has some important distinguishing feature in common with the members of its corresponding symbolic group. Thus the second member of the symbolized set partakes of at least the principal distinguishing feature of the second of the five symbolic groups: a passive, 'feminine' nature; and it may well have more specific properties in common with individual members of that group—the sphere, the elephant, etc. By extension, successive members of the symbolized set are related, each to the next, as are successive symbolic groups, the third member being, for example, the antithesis of the second in respect of activity/passivity. This much can be confidently predicted. However,

the actual identification of the ultimate referent will be possible only if the analysis of the symbols is matched by a thorough investigation of the widest possible range of meditative practices, accompanied by a phenomenological description of resulting mental states and abilities. This we would argue, with Frits Staal, is not an impossible task.[21] That the description of meditative states must necessarily be 'subjective' does not entail that the study is therefore irrational; for critical comparative means of corroboration can be applied similar to those used in checking the description of any historical, and therefore unique, 'objective' phenomenon or event.

Even after the identification of the ultimate referent, one further step will have to be taken before the community of Buddhist scholars would be prepared to concede that the interpretation of the Intentional Language had been achieved : it will have to be shown that the proposed interpretation is supported by, or at least compatible with, textual and other historical evidence. As a minimal requirement, it must be shown possible to provide a coherent historical reconstruction that will account for the development of the Intentional Language within the broader context of the historical development of Buddhism in general.

CONCLUSION

A rational and scientific methodology for the interpretation of Buddhist symbolism has been proposed. This methodology takes into account the dominant characteristic of all early Indian symbolism : the identification of homologous sets of entities on the basis of macrocosm-microcosm parallelisms. It has been shown that the combinations of symbols found in the *dhyāni* Buddha *maṇḍala* and the *cakras* do not reflect symbolic equivalences. The first step towards an interpretation is therefore to discover those equivalences. The method for doing this has been illustrated. The final state in the interpretation of the symbols will necessitate adequate phenomenological descriptions of meditative techniques and resulting mental states, based on introspective observation by trained meditators. This presents a challenge for the psychology of religion; however, in Buddhism with its well-developed meditative methods, the task is probably less daunting, and potentially less subjective, than in other religious traditions. Only when such descriptions are available can the ultimate referents of the symbols of the Intentional Language be determined on sound methodological principles.

NOTES

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1. For example, the *Hevajra Tantra* speaks of the *saṁdhyā-bhāṣā*, "that great convention of the *yoginīs* which the *Śrāvakas* and others cannot unriddle" (Snellgrove, 1959 : 99). The question whether this symbolic language is properly called *saṁdhā-bhāṣā* (intentional language) or *saṁdhyā-bhāṣā* (twilight language) has not yet been resolved. Shastri (1928), Eliade (1969) : 249-254), and Bharati (1965 : 164-184) favour the former reading; Wayman (1973 : 128-130) favours the latter. But whichever reading is accepted, the sense remains the same; on this there is agreement.
2. By "natural associations" we mean those associations between symbol and referent which derive automatically from the innate characteristics of both (see Kahler, 1960).
3. Interpretation of the intentional meaning of a symbol in specific contexts in no way invalidates interpretations of the natural meaning of that same symbol. As Eliade (1959 : 99) has stressed, an essential characteristic of all religious symbolism is its "multivalence, its capacity to express simultaneously a number of meanings whose continuity is not evident on the plane of immediate experience".
4. On the difficulties inherent in this undertaking, see Elder (1975).
5. Compare Bharati (1965) with Govinda (1960). Attempts such as those of Jung (1959) and Tucci (1959) to interpret the *maṇḍala* in broad psychological terms shed no real light on the Intentional Language because they disregard all details of content.
6. It is possible, of course, that the Intentional Language has no meaning at all; but that would have to be demonstrated rather than assumed. We must begin with the assumption that there is a meaning to be discovered, and develop a methodology of interpretation accordingly.
7. These three categories in the alphabet are exemplified in the *mantras—ahaṃ (a/ha/ṃ)*, and *evaṃ (e/va/ṃ)*. On *evaṃ* see Dasgupta (1958 : 110).
8. An extended example of the triad moon/sun/eclipse is to be seen in the Navagraha (nine "planets") as depicted in South Indian iconography. Each group in the triad has itself three members : Moon, Venus Mercury/Mars, Sun, Jupiter/lunar eclipse, Saturn, solar eclipse.
9. For a listing of both elements and colours, see *Aṅguttara-nikāya* X, 25-26. The order of the elements in the *Bar-do Thos-grol*— space, water, earth, fire, air— has arisen through converting the cruciform pattern of the *maṇḍala* into a list (see Evans-Wentz, 1960 : 105-118).
10. An alternative version exists in which blue and white are transposed. This version, reflected in the inconstant colouring of the eastern and central cells of the *maṇḍala*, may have arisen through doubt as to whether it would not be more appropriate to pair blue with space and white with water.
11. The number of *cakras* recognized ranges from three in the earliest versions to

five or more; however, the four-membered arrangement is the most widely recognized (see Dasgupta, 1958 : 146-153).

12. For convenience we adopt the widely accepted term "*dhyāni* Buddha" despite the valid objections raised by various authorities (e.g. Saunders, 1962).
13. Dasgupta (1958 : 148) points out that the order of the three *kāyas* in the *cakras* conflicts with the "natural" order (see also Snellgrove, 1959 : 38-40 and 128-129). Indeed both *cakras* and *maṇḍala* exhibit so many varieties that it is hard to see how any combination can be taken as canonical. As Snellgrove (1959 : 39 footnote) observes, "there is clearly great variety in these lists, and contradictions can easily be shown even within a single tradition, if one checks the lists for cross-references. They seem to have no significance, apart from purely local modes of meditation, and more often they seem to merely represent ill-conceived attempts at needless systematization."
14. However, Govinda (1960 : 181-182) seems to recognize that this hardly constitutes an explanation, for he states that

> The Lord of a *cakra* is therefore not a deity inherent in its nature or representing the personification of the elementary qualities of the Centre, but a symbol of those forces with which we wish to saturate and activate the Centre. The choice of this symbol depends on its particular suitability for being abie to act upon the *cakra* in question, either with a view to intensify or to sublimate them. In order to achieve this, the symbol must coincide with certain features or qualities of the *cakra*, though it may be different from the elementary nature of the *cakra* in other respects.

15. Similarly, Samuel (1977 : 14) suggests that the function of the symbolic groupings within the *maṇḍala* consists not in communicating a message, but in "transforming the world-view of the meditator".
16. A good example of a maṇḍala with the four shapes included may be seen in the collection of the Birla Academy of Art and Culture in Calcutta.
17. These correspondences derive from the inherent characteristics of the members of each set. The cube suggests the solidity and immobility of the earth element; the sphere, always ready to roll from a higher point to a lower, suggests the instability and passivity of water: the cone suggests upward movement and the flame-like form of fire; and the hollow hemisphere suggests the emptiness of air.
18. Occasionally the positions of the circle and semicircle are interchanged (see Evans-Wentz, 1967 : 304-305). This simple world-map is relatively ancient; it was later elaborated by the addition of seven concentric annular continents.
19. Bharati (1965 : 133-134) notes that the common interpretation of *maṇi padme* as "the jewel (is) in the lotus" is unacceptable, since *maṇi* is not in the nominative case. He proposes instead that *maṇipadme* is the vocative of *maṇipadmā*, supposedly the name of a female deity; but since no deity of this name is known, this is hardly an adequate explanation for this most important of Buddhist *mantras*. We would explain *maṇipadme* as a *dvandva* meaning simply "the jewel and the lotus".
20. There exist other less widely accepted arrangements of the *bījas* within the *maṇḍala*, for example the following (Dasgupta, 1958 : 87) : Vairocana : *Oṃ*, Akṣobhya, *Hūṃ*, Ratnasambhava : *Svā*, Amitabha : *Aḥ*, Amoghasiddhi : *Hā*.

This version agrees with the above interpretation in assigning *Āḥ* to Amitābha. It has clearly derived from an extended version of the *mūlamantra Oṃ Āh Hūṃ Svāhā*, the two syllables of *Svāhā* having been mechanically assigned to the historically most recent *dhyāni* Buddhas, Ratnasambhava and Amoghasiddhi.

21. Staal (e.g. 1975 : 136-147) presents an extended argument for the rational study of mystical experience, including the interpretations advanced to explain it.

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