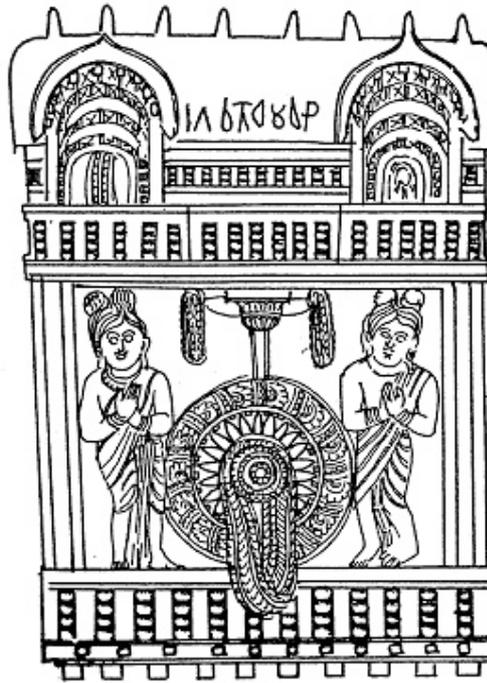


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On the Symbolism of the Wheel in an Intercultural Perspective



Words of Welcome and of Gratitude
to
His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama

at the Occasion of his Visit to the
Tibet Institute Rikon (Switzerland)

on August 13, 2005

by
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Chairman of the Foundation Council TIR

Your Holiness,
dear Guests,

In the name of the Tibet Institute's Foundation Council and its Honorary President, Mr. Jacques Kuhn, I welcome you and all those who have come with you to Rikon!

Welcome to *Chö Khor Göm* – welcome to the “Monastery of the Wheel of the Law”, which was founded in 1968 under your personal patronage. With the symbol of the wheel, you have anticipated the three major tasks, which – in the course of the years – you have assigned to this institute. These are:

- first, the task of teaching and of providing spiritual support to the Tibetan community in Switzerland;
- second, the task of building bridges between Tibetan Buddhism and other religions in our country;
- third, the task of creating new understanding between modern science and the Buddhist spiritual worldview.

Please allow me to briefly reflect on each of these tasks, thus responding to your triple mandate as it echoes in a Western mind today.

Illustration on cover page: Worship of the *dharmacakra*; stone relief from the inner face of the Prasenajit Pillar, South gate, Bhārhut Stūpa, North India, early 1st century B.C.

I.

I start with teaching, because this is the best known context wherein the “wheel of the law” appears. By his first sermon, Buddha is said to have set the wheel in motion. He has created a new understanding about human nature, about our suffering and about the possibility of ending such suffering. In the light of this teaching, the eight spokes of the wheel take on the meaning of the Eightfold Path leading beyond suffering. The foremost among these paths is Right View, followed by Right Resolve, Right Speech and others. All these Paths are central to Buddhist teaching. They are central to the teaching of this monastery.

As a Westerner I ask: What is “right”? What is exactly meant by “Right View” or “Right Resolve”?

The Buddhist Scholar Anagarika Govinda responds: The key to understanding lies in the Sanskrit word *samyak*, which is usually translated by “right”, but which more accurately expresses a completeness or a totality. Thus, “Right View” is **complete seeing of total reality**; it does not exclude any aspects of life; it faces the light as well as the dark side, enjoyment as well as suffering.

Buddha did not conceive life as either positive or negative, as either desirable or despicable, as either meaningful or meaningless. Rather he understood life as potentially both: as the highest and the most relative good of humankind. Both perspectives are deeply rooted in the spiritual experience of humankind.

This insight into our inner reality corresponds to the understanding which Western analytical psychology has won of the human psyche. The hypothesis of *samyak*, of psychic completeness, is not the result of arbitrary speculation. It is based on meditative introspection in the East and of empirical observation in the West: Life never follows any one-track logic. It is constituted by unending complexities and contradictions. To see them all, to accept them, to suffer through them, and to try and walk on a middle path between them is the teaching of Buddhism as well as of Analytical Psychology.

I am grateful for this concurrence. It allows me to consider the wheel not only as a symbol of Buddhist teaching, but of an archetypal truth which is also my own.

II.

I pass on to the second task, which is **to build bridges between Tibetan Buddhism and other religions in our country** – between the Geshes and monks of Rikon and the many seekers in the Swiss society.

The wheel is a powerful expression of the spirit in which such bridge building should be undertaken. For it is by no means a symbol of exclusively Buddhist origin. At the time of the historic Buddha, e.g., the symbol of the wheel was prevalent throughout India; but we also find it in the religious traditions of China, of Neolithic Africa and of the pre-colonial Americas. Painted wheels are also found in the prehistoric caves of Europe, and later, the wheel became an important element in the Christian cathedrals of the Middle Ages.

The main reason that makes the wheel a universal religious symbol stems probably from the fact that it represents and unites – in the most perfect possible manner – two pairs of opposites. These are: the “outer” and the “inner”, the moving and the motionless. The felly marks the “outer”; it is motion and restlessness. The nave recalls the centre, the innermost point, which – in spite of the wheel’s motion – is itself without motion. This centre, all over the world, has become a symbol of the Absolute.

In the Upanishads and Indian vedānta Philosophy, this centre was called the Self, *ātman*, the mover who initiates all movement. In Buddhism, the motionless centre, the point without extension, in Sanskrit *kha*, which is zero, nil, became a symbol for the unspeakable, that which is empty of all qualifications, *śūnyatā*, *nirvāna*.

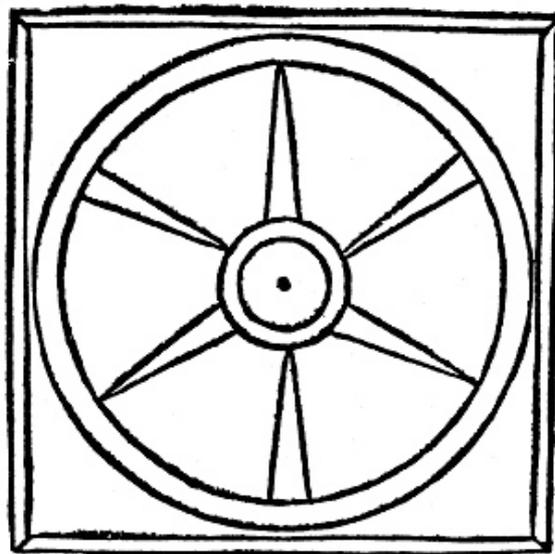
In the Jewish tradition of Eastern Europe, we find a wonderful story illuminating the absolute supremacy of the wheel’s centre: According to this, Rabbi Jizchak Meir, talking one evening to his grandson, reflected:

When a man becomes chairman (or President or Chief or Director or any other form of “boss”), many utilities are required: A building with many rooms, and tables, and chairs; also, someone becomes the administrator, another one will be a servant, and so on.

But then, the Adversary appears; and he uproots the innermost tiny point, while all other things remain as they are; and the wheel continues to turn – but the centre is lacking.

Then, Rabbi Meir raised his voice and said: “May God help us, we must never allow this to happen!”

In the Christian tradition of our own country, we come across a historic incidence from which we learn how the wheel as a symbol of deepest religious experience originates and develops. I refer to the Meditation Wheel of Brother Klaus von Flüe, the only Swiss of all times who has been canonized by the Roman Church. Klaus lived in the 15th century. After leaving his family and a political career, he spent many years as a hermit in a narrow gorge of the Swiss Alps. There, a vision occurred to him – not the first in his life, but one of the most awe-inspiring. It was an apparition of light, of surpassing intensity, in the form of a human face.



“The Wheel”; diagram for meditation, developed from a vision of Brother Klaus von Flüe, Switzerland, 15th and 16th centuries.

The vision was so impressive that Klaus was compelled to stay with it, to deal with it, to integrate it into his mind and to render it intelligible to human understanding. Thus, gradually, a painted design arose from the inner vision and took the shape of a wheel. During the first phase, Klaus barely succeeded in working his experience into a narrow circle. This seemed to be the only way to contain the overwhelming image that had appeared to him. Later, Klaus added a second circle, enclosing the first one. After the hermit’s death, the succeeding generations continued to interpret the Saint’s vision: the outer and the inner circle were linked with spokes; a wheel was developed, framing in its nave the remembrance of what had appeared so overwhelmingly to the hermit. It was illuminating and frightening at the same time: the Face of God.

I have mentioned these examples from various religions in order to underline how much the symbol of the wheel can be a bridge building element between different creeds. In East and West, South and North, the wheel recalls the ONE centre, the motionless Mover, the ineffable supreme reality to which all humans of all times may refer. I am grateful that the Rikon monastery is dedicated to this image, because it includes my own belief as well as the one of many other contemporaries.

III.

I now turn to the third task which Your Holiness has given to Rikon. It consists in **creating new understanding between Western Science and Eastern *dharma***; and I shall be very brief on it.

It seems to me that the image of the wheel provides an excellent opportunity to illustrate the fundamental difference between science and *dharma*.

Metaphorically speaking, the spiritual movement of monastic Buddhism has always been from the felly to the nave, i.e. from the entanglement with the outer world and its restlessness towards the unknown centre and its stillness. Western science, on the other hand, has chosen to follow the opposite direction. It turns its attention more and more exclusively towards the phenomenal periphery of the world, turning its back to the questions of centre and meaning.

But here again, the metaphor of the wheel may help us out of an apparently hopeless contradiction. For it contains both: the nave and the felly, the unspeakable and the quantifiable. And the spokes are fixed at both ends, near the centre as well as near the rim, near the secrets of *dharma* and near the secrets of material evolution. The wheel, which is a symbol of universal reality, comprehends and necessitates both human approaches, the one seeking *dharma* and the one seeking scientific insight.

It is with this understanding that the Tibet Institute Rikon has taken up the task you have assigned to us: To contribute to a new dialogue between *dharma* and science, and to do this with all the humility appropriate for the task. It is a task that cannot be solved in the outer world alone, but must be realized within the heart of each individual, of everyone of us.

Your Holiness,

Let me conclude by expressing my sincere thanks to You for having accepted, once again, our invitation to Rikon – but even more for all the invaluable inspiration you have given us, and you continue to give us, through your personal teaching, your building religious bridges and your dialogue between science and *dharma*.

As a token of our gratitude, please accept this prayer wheel - another symbol of a rotating movement around a motionless centre. It is of the same type like all the prayer wheels fixed on the outer walls of this monastery, and it was hand-made by Mr. Jacques Kuhn personally. We shall send it from Rikon to Dharamsala, and we hope that it may find an appropriate place somewhere in your Indian home town.

Thank You!

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