

The Significance of Lotus in Buddhism

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Abstract

Lotus is one of the significant symbols of Buddhism. Naturally, lotus plants start to grow in the mire at the bottom of the lake before they pass through the mass of water and finally the flowers bloom in the air. Likewise, the wise and the virtuous ones can manage to move toward *Nibbāna* after passing through the thick mass of ignorance (*Avijjā*) with the use of wisdom (*vijjā ñaṇā*), although they are born in the deep mire of defilement (*Kilesā*). The lotus flowers can beautify the surface of water. The lotus flowers can make the lake peaceful and delightful by spreading its beautiful petals over the surface of water gently producing its fragrance in surrounding. It is the colour of the Lotus flowers that make the scenery around the lake more delightful and beautiful. In the same way, the wise person can bring peace and joy to other people in his social environment. He can replace social ills by community welfare activities. A wise person does the same to his society. Undoubtedly, Social tensions and crimes arise from the anti-social behaviour of the foolish people. But the wise and the sensible ones never disturb their society. They never do harm to the society. Thus, lotus flower has become a symbol of wisdom.

Keyword: *Nibbāna, Avijjā, Kilesā, vijjā ñaṇā*

Historical Background history of the symbol of lotus flower

The symbol of a lotus flower has been used since the earliest time of the human history to indicate a particular thing or person of significance. A lot of evidence can be found in Egypt that indicates the symbolic meaning of a lotus flower. About 5000 years ago (about 3000 BC), some big cities namely Mohanjodaro and Harappa developed at the Indus Valley. When these old cities were excavated, the statutes of women wearing a lotus flower in their hair and circular seals with the pictures of a woman sitting in the lotus flowers were found. (Kyar,1992: 9-10)



Researcher mentioned that other evidence concerning the symbolic use of the lotus flower was found in Vedas (the religious treaties) of the Aryans who invaded India from the north-west. According to the Vedas, the origin of this world was a very huge lotus flower consisting of one thousand petals from which Brahman (Paramatta) appeared.



Then, the Brahma, the creator of this world, and Saraswati Devī (Sūrasatī), his consort, appeared from the Brahman. In this way, all other animate and inanimate things appeared. They worshipped Sara Swati Deva regarded as Sirī Devī by the Aryans. They worshipped Saraswati Devī as they believed that she could bless them with good knowledge, longing, offspring's, attendants, servants and wealth. So, they usually made the figure of Saraswati Devī standing on a lotus flower. Based on this belief, the lotus flower had become a symbol of longevity, prosperity, fertility, fame, and auspiciousness. When the Buddha enlightened, the lotus flower also represented purity and holiness. (Kyar, 1992: 11-12) Thus, the lotus flower became the holy flower that was admired by the Buddhists. Accordingly, the Buddhists

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start to sculpt these symbols (lotus flowers) at the temples, monasteries and stūpas.

In the Union of Myanmar, where Theravada Buddhism flourishes, yellow robes have been offered to the Lord Buddha in different seasons for many hundreds of years. The robes are known as Waso-thingan, Kahtein-thingan, Matho-thingan, Kyar-thingan and Pantthaku-thingan. The Waso-thingan is the robe offered on the occasion of Wazo, the three-month Lenten period from round about July to October. The Kahtein-thingan is the robe that is offered to the Buddha and his congregation of monks, that is, the Sangha, at the end of lent. This robe must not be offered to a monk of one's acquaintance or choice but to the Sangha in general. The Matho-thingan, literally meaning “the robe that is not decayed”; it is the robe which is woven on the full moon night of Tazaungmon and which must be completed before the sun rises the next day for offering at sacred Images of the Buddha. Some of the latter robes are woven with yarn from the lotus. The very first Pantthagu-thingan, was the robe sewn by the Buddha himself with remnants of discarded clothing. This was in adherence to the vow of poverty – no costly robes, no silks or velvets, just a simple garment patched from torn pieces of cloth - a robe to clothe oneself in decency and modesty. Another significance fact is that the Buddha laid out the scraps of cloth in the pattern of cultivated fields, each enclosed by low dykes. This pattern is still adhered to in making of robes for the Saṅgha.

Some regard the lotus robe as the noblest and most sacred one because it is meant as offering to the future Buddha, aspiring Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

Aim and Objective

To give the knowledge that the Lotus is one of the significant symbols of Buddhism and it is widely used in the field of Myanmar Culture and to know the purpose this application is use for.

Finding

The nature of lotus flower

A lotus flower blooms clean and fragrant in the sun's rays with no trace of the bog (mud) and no drop of water on its beautiful and pure petals, although the plant anchors its roots in the bog (mire) and it grows and nourishes in the water. (Di, I , 1979:71; Ma, I , 1956: 34-55; A,ii, 1982: 22; Apa . A, I, 1979: 115). Likewise, a wise and virtuous person has no defilement or no evils deeds although he was born in the human abode, full of evil.



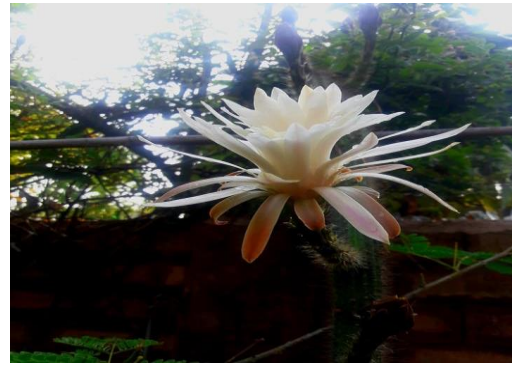
The lotus flower that blooms clean over the surface of water can make the lake and its surrounding pleasant and delightful. Likewise, the wise and the virtuous will certainly do well to their races, and society. They will make their society peaceful, prosperous and successful. It is like the qualities of a lotus flower which is the symbol of the good morality, purity and integrity.

Different kinds of lotus flowers

The lotus flower has different meanings and interpretations. Different kinds of lotus flower symbols found in Myanmar literature, paintings and stone carvings can be interpreted in different ways. There are eight orders and 70 species of lotus flowers in the world. Of them all, the five major species are popular in Myanmar culture and are considered to be significant by Myanmar people. The five species (Di, i, 1979: 71; Ma,I, 1956: 34-55; A,ii,1982: 22; Apa. A, I, 1979: 115) that are common in Myanmar as follows;

(1) Kumudā (Kumudra)

Lotus flower. It is the most holy species in the lotus because it only blooms under the moonbeam; Apa,I,30,407

**(2) Pundarika lotus flower; White Lotus**

This symbolizes Bodhi, the state of total mental purity and spiritual perfection, and pacification of the nature. It generally has eight petals corresponding to the Noble Eightfold Path of Good Law. It is the Lotus found at the heart of the Gabbhadhātu Mandala, being the womb or embryo of the world. It is characteristic of the esoteric sects, and the lotus of the Buddhas. (Di,i,1979: 71; Ma,i,1982: 345; A,ii,1982: 22)

3. Paduma lotus flower (paduma);

Blue, Yellow and Pink (Vi, I, 2000: 59: Di,ii,1979: 17, Sam, I, 1959: 81)



(4) Red lotus flower (kyar nī)**(5) Blue lotus (kyar nyo)**

According to Pāḷi Canon, five kinds of lotus flower are as follows;

(Dī. A.ii.460)

- (1) Kumuda (Kumudra) lotus flower – it blooms under the moonlight (Some say its color is yellow.)
- (2) Puṇḍayika – its color is completely white like the snow.
- (3) Paduma lotus flower- its color is slightly white and blooms under the sunlight.
- (4) Red lotus flower (kyar nī) - its color is deeply red and blooms up with many petals.
- (5) Brown lotus flower (kyar nyo) - it beautifully blooms with good smell under the sunlight. (Dī.A.ii.1969: 460)

According to the Ayubba kyan,

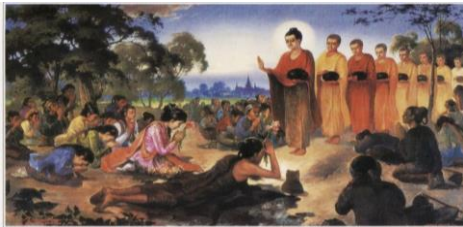
1. Paduma = White Colour bloom with sunlight
2. Uppala = A light Brown Colour
3. Nilana = A pale Red Colour
4. Kumuda = White or Yellow Colour bloom in the moonlight
5. Sogandhika = Blue Colour, bloom in the moonlight and very sweet smell
6. Kuvalaya = Red Colour
7. Pundarika = Very White Colour (Kyar, 1992: 8)

The Buddha and the Lotus flower (the role of lotus flower in the Buddha's life)

The lotus is regarded as the holiest flower by the Buddhists because it is associated with some events in the Buddha's life story. (Kyar. 1992: 15-19; CB, 2010:4)

- (1) Sumedā hermit who would become the future Gotama Buddha offered the lotus flowers to the Dipaṅkara Buddha. (Bv, I,1959: 58-59)
- (2) At the time of the conception of the Bodhisatta the Queen Mahāmāyā dreamt that a white elephant holding a bunch of lotus flowers with its trunk came to her, walked clockwise around her three times as a gesture of worship and entered her womb from the right side. (Introduction to Indian Art,1956: 14)
- (3) No sooner was the Bodhisatta Prince Siddhattha born than he stood firmly on his feet, looked out the ten directions, and took seven steps forward facing northwards. It was learnt that whenever the newly born prince took steps a lotus flower bloomed forth under his sole. Thus, the seven lotus flowers bloomed at the places where the Bodhisatta taken the seven steps.
- (4) When Prince Siddhattha attained the Buddhahood, he preached the sermon sitting on the lotus throne.

As mentioned above, the lotus flower is found and associated with some significant events in the Buddha's life. Accordingly, the lotus flower played an important part in Buddhism.



The Dipaṅkarā Buddha



Queen Māyā's Dream



Seven steps of Bodhisatta



The Buddha preached the sermon sitting on the lotus throne.

The advantages of offering lotus flower

In one of his former rebirths, the future elder Kāludāyī, who would become the connatal mate of Prince Siddhattha in the time of Gotama Buddha, offered delicious alms food, paduma lotus flowers, brown lotus flowers, and Arabian jasmynes to Padumuttara Buddha on his long journey. (A,A,I, 1979: 233-35; The, A,1979: 2,165) He received the prophecy from Padumuttara Buddha. One hundred thousand world cycles after that rebirth, he was reborn as a son of the Minister, one of the relatives of King Suddhodana of Kapilavutthu. He was born on the same day when Prince Siddhattha was born. In other words, he was simultaneously born at the precise moment of the birth of Prince Siddhattha. His name was Udāyi but he was called Kāludāyī for his dark skin. When he came of age, he became a Minister at the royal palace.

Once there was a rich man who possessed 160 crores of gold coin in Sāvatti. He had a beautiful daughter whose complexion was tender and beautiful. Like the inner flesh of the bud of a blue lotus flower. So, she was named 'Uppalavaṇṇa'. Later, she became a Therī in the holy order. She was reborn as the daughter of the King of Nagās (mythical serpent) during the time of Padumuttara Buddha. Her name was Vimalā and she was one of the female disciples of Padumuttara Buddha. Being a pious devotee, The King, her father, offered alms to the Buddha and Saṅgha. She offered the Buddha Aruṇa (red lotus) lotus flowers, grown in the abode of mythical serpent. She also prayed that her complexion would be beautiful like the color of those flowers and she would become a famous *Therī* in the *sāsana* of the next Buddha (Ja, A , ii , 1979: 266)



As a result of offering lotus flowers to the Buddha, the would-be Uppalāvaṇṇa Ther had fragrant body odour like the pleasant smell of the brown lotus flower. To everyone's amazement, her body smells sweet and pleasant. When she came of age, she was popular among all countries located in Jambūdīpa Island.

According to the belief of the Buddhists, there are two kinds of worlds: the world in which no Buddha appears and the world in which the Buddha appears. Buddha Kambhā is a world in which five Buddhas appear. According to the Buddhist terms, the existing world is Buddha Kambhā. The origin of this world or the first place that started to exist was the site where the Bodhi tree and the golden throne existed when the Earth started to form. The Buddhist believe that the particular place (the location of the Bodhi tree and the golden throne) will be the last one when the world is completely destroyed. It would be destroyed last. It is also said that some clumps of lotus plants with the eight requisites had grown at that place. These clumps of lotus plants represent the number of the Buddhas who would appear in the world. If there is only one clump of lotus plants, only one Buddha will enlighten and two clumps of lotus plants suggest and two Buddhas. Sudhāvāsa Bhramās made such prognostication and he took the eight requisites including robes to the realm of Bhramā. They have to keep them until the following Buddha enlightens. They will bring the requisites and offer them to the following Buddha. Based on this belief/concept, the robes woven of the fibers of lotus plants are supposed to become popular.

The lotus flower used as a metaphor

The Buddha said, "Whatever lotus flower be it is Uppala lotus flower or Pundarika lotus or Paduma lotus, it never gets smeared with water even though its roots are in the water. Likewise, "I (the Buddha) have no attachment or no smear of *kilesā*, the elements of the conditioned world (*Saṅkhāra loka*) even though I was born and brought up here." (A.iii, 1993:376-377)

Based on the Buddha's metaphorical use of the lotus flower, it became a symbol of the purity of mind or the one who is free from impurity of mind.

Just as a lotus flower passes through water and bloom clean and fragrant in the air although its roots are in the bog/mire, the Buddha gets through the *Avijjā* (ignorance) with the use of Wisdom (*vijjañāna*) and proceeds towards Nibbāna. In this way, lotus has become a symbol of Magga Phalañāna.

Symbols of Emperor Asoka



About 235 years after the demise of the Buddha, Emperor Asoka (272 – 232 BC) ruled India. He was the great supporter of Buddha sāsana. He built many cetiyas and stone pillars in his empire. But there was no image of the Buddha in the artworks of his religious monuments. Some artworks of Amarāvati (about the 1st century A.D) also showed no trace of the Buddha image. At that time, only symbols were used to illustrate the Buddha’s life story. Among the artworks that used as symbols to portray the life events of the Buddha, Asoka’s stone pillars are particularly prominent. The stone pillar located at Sarnath had some symbols on top of it.

There are four lion figures sitting back-to-back at the top of the pillar. Between the figures of the four lions and the withering lotus petals are the four wheels of Dhamma. Again, four symbols of the four animals: an elephant, a horse, a lion and a bull are placed between the wheels.

The symbol of an elephant represents the conception of the Bodhisatta and a horse indicates Prince Siddhattha’s renunciation of the world. The lion is the symbol of the Buddha’s enlightenment and the four lions suggest that the Buddha is calm and confident enough to teach the four kinds of audience/congregation. The wheel of dhamma symbolizes the preaching of the first sermon to a group of five ascetics. The bull indicates the realization of *Mahāparinibbāna*.

The life events of the Buddha were illustrated with symbols in Sanchi *stūpa* and Amaravati artworks. The archways of Sanchi *stūpa* are decorated with some symbols such as lotus flower, the Bodhi tree, the wheel of dhamma and the *stūpas* etc. the lotus flower symbolizes the birth of the Buddha and the Bodhi tree the enlightenment: the Wheel of dhamma is a symbol of the first sermon and *stūpas* (Topozone) the *Parinibbāna*. (Kyar,1992:18-20)

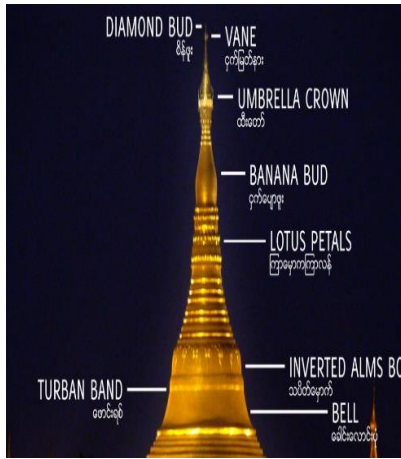
The symbol of lotus flower found in *Cetiyas*

In the practice of offering lotus flowers, the natural lotus flowers can easily get withered. So, the Buddhists began thinking of some ways to create symbols of lotus flowers in their artworks to decorate the religious monuments. The lotus flower is dried and the symbol is put on such materials as bricks, stones, concrete and wood etc. to create the artworks such as paintings, sculpture, stucco, stone carving etc. The artists decorate the temples and *stūpas* (*cetiyas*) with the symbols of lotus flowers in addition to embellishment. Symbols of lotus flowers are created in different ways.

The traditional art style such as convoluted lotus stems, buds, and blossoms, large lotus petals (ka note pan) to depict the dancing style, elephants, horses, and female figures are common in Myanmar.

The images of the Buddha can also be place on the lotus thrones and they can be placed under the canopy air the form of lotus leaves. The robes woven from the lotus fibres can be offered to the Buddha image.

The statues of the guardian spirits (Nats) and other celestial beings are sculpted on the base: structure in the forms of lotus flowers. Some celestial beings including *Sakka*, Loka Nat and others are sculpted on the petals of lotus flowers. The flowers decorated the lion statue are usually lotus flowers.



The *cetiya*s with bare ground as flooring can also be decorated with different designs of lotus flowers: at certain parts. The artists decorate the particular parts of a *cetiya*s with the design of small lotus petals (Kyar Nu), blooming lotus (Kyar Lan), old petals (Kyar yint), withering lotus (Kyar Hmout) etc.(Than Tun,2002: 62)

In paying homage to the Buddha, some people tend to curve their palms in the form of a lotus flower. This is a symbol of offering a lotus bud to the Buddha. It can also be interpreted as worshipping Arimetteya Buddha, who will enlighten next.

Conclusion and overview

Although the lotus plant grows in the water, lotus flower rises over the surface of the water with no drop of water on it. Whenever any water happens to touch the flower, it has to slide down immediately. Thus, no drop of water can contaminate the lotus flower. Likewise, the Buddha is free from all cravings and *kilesās* such as love, hatred, and attachment etc. he has gained emancipation (*vimutti*) from all kinds of *kilesās* despite being born in the sensual world. Just as the lotus flower can create the beauty of the surface of water without being contaminated, the Buddha can bring about the well-being of the worldlings (*puthujanas*) without being affected by the defilement of mind. Consequently, the Buddhists begin to use different designs of lotus flowers in religious monuments and *cetiya*s not only as decoration but also as a symbol of the Buddha.

In Myanmar, People in Inlay mostly weave the lotus robe with the fibers from the lotus plants. A woman or a girl who weaves the lotus robe keeps the five precepts. The buyer prefers a robe made in the time of Myanmar New Year. The lotus fiber robe is mostly offered at both Kathina and Waso Robe-offering ceremonies. Therefore, lotus fibers woven robes are ordered directly from the loom owner, usually in the beginning of a year. So, the finest lotus products in Inlay Lake are unique among one of the most precious textile products in the world.

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