

5.3.6. Traditional Symbols

Traditional symbols have occupied a significant space in our culture. They convey essential messages as well as play a decorative role. For instance the symbol of Thuenpa Puenzhi conveys a very strong message to the society on interdependence and harmony. At the same time the painting decorates the walls. Few significant symbols are presented below:

5.3.6.1. The Eight Lucky Signs

In Bhutan, Trashy Tagye or the Eight Lucky Signs are considered auspicious. It is believed that the gods in Tusheeta Heaven had offered these objects to Gautama Buddha after he attained enlightenment. Hence, they are considered as signs of good fortune. They are painted everywhere:

5.3.6.1.1. The Parasol

The Parasol (*dug*) symbolizes the authority of the Buddha. It stands for protection and royalty. The Parasol protects the head from the scorching heat of Sun just as the law protects the mind from the scorching passion. It represents Buddha's head.

5.3.6.1.2. The Vase

The Bumpa or Vase represents a repository of inexhaustible wealth, good health and long life. It possesses the quality of spontaneous manifestation as it remains perpetually full. It is believed that when the vase was presented before the throat of the Buddha, it enables the speech of Dharma to prevail forever in the land and inexhaustible wealth prospers at all times to come.

5.3.6.1.3. The Conch

The Conch or *dungkar*, especially one that winds clockwise, symbolizes the sound of Dharma that awakens all sentient beings from the slumber of ignorance. It is an emblem of power and authority. It persuades them towards the path of noble deeds that are beneficial to others. It is said that Buddha blew the conch shell when he decided to turn the wheel of dharma law. The conch shell is blown in commemoration of this event whenever there is a special sermon headed by a great lama.

5.3.6.1.4. The Golden Fish

A pair of *ser-nya* or the Golden fish represents the Lord Buddha's eyes and stands for wisdom, happiness, wealth and also unity. The pair signifies the ability to swim with ease without obstruction in the ocean of suffering. They also symbolize awakening as it is believed that fish never closes its eyes.

5.3.6.1.5. The White Lotus

The White Lotus or *Pedma* represents the Lord Buddha's tongue and symbolizes the ultimate goal of enlightenment. The Lotus grows out of dirt, but it is clean and pure. It stands for purification of Ku Sung Thug (body, speech and mind) and also symbolizes peace.

5.3.6.1.6. The Knot of Eternity

The Knot of Eternity represents the meditative mind. It is a series of endless knots that has neither the beginning nor the end. It stands for eternity. It stands for the nature of reality and shows the web of karma. *Palbheu* also stands for good luck and fortune.

5.3.6.1.7. The Banner of Victory

The Banner of Victory or *Gyaltshen* is the emblem of the Lord Buddha and depicts how he overcame all the obstacles to attain the enlightenment. It signifies the fortune of having victory of good over the evil forces, which hinder the success of noble goals and also proclaims the victory of piety over evil. It represents the Buddha's body.

5.3.6.1.8. The Dharma Wheel

The *Khorlo* representing the Lord Buddha's hands and legs, the Dharma Wheel symbolizes the propagation of Buddha's teaching. It is the symbol of formulation of universal law in Buddhism. The first sermon setting in motion of the cycle of law is symbolized in a wheel with eight spokes, which stands for the eight-fold path.



5.3.6.2. The Four Harmonious Friends

The paintings of the Four Harmonious Brothers or Friends, popularly known as *Thuenpa Puen Zhi* can be seen almost everywhere in Bhutan. The painting depicts an elephant, a monkey, a rabbit and a bird alongside a tree, which the four friends/brothers are said to have nurtured. The image of the Four Friends is painted on the walls of the temples, houses, hotels, institutions, etc. By having the painting of the Thuenpa Puenzhi on the walls, it is believed to bring about harmony, peace and unity in society or even among the people. It signifies interdependence besides being the symbol of harmony.



It also stands for friendship and cooperation. In Buddhist belief, the painting represents Lord Buddha and his close disciples. The bird is Buddha; the rabbit is Shari Putra, the monkey Muggalyana, and the elephant Ananda. It edifies Bhutanese values of etiquette like respect for elders, cooperation, and generosity. It can be interpreted as the need of unity in the country despite having different races. People paint the Four Friends at homes with a belief that there will be no separation, discord, and partition within the family.

5.3.6.3. The Four Auspicious Animals

Tag Seng Chung Druk depict four powerful and auspicious animals, namely Tiger, Snow Lion, Garuda and Dragon. These animals symbolize qualities like awareness, vision, confidence, joy and power. They are believed to have the power to avert untoward situations in life.

5.3.6.3.1. The Tiger stands for confidence, dignity, discipline and modesty. The animal is relaxed yet can get

furiously when the situation demands. The animal stands for vigour. Guru Rinpoche brought Buddhism to Bhutan hundreds of years ago, riding on the back of a flying tigress. Thus, this powerful animal remains a symbol of great reverence.

5.3.6.3.2. The Snow-lion (Sengge) stands for vitality, dignity and purity. Its body and mind represents the vibrant energy of goodness and a natural sense of delight.

5.3.6.3.3. Garuda stands for fearlessness and power. The mythical bird is believed to be the king of the birds. The painting is believed to avert the illness and many of the evil spells cast by the *Nagas* or the local deities.

5.3.6.3.4. Dragon symbolizes elegance, generosity, calmness and achievements. When the Druk roars in the sky it is believed to open our eyes and awaken to all the delusions of the world. The Druk is indestructible and energetic, and holds in its hands precious gems that stand for wealth, prosperity, and perfection. The Dragon in its entire splendor also represents the country – Druk Yul – the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

5.3.6.4. The Six Symbols of Longevity

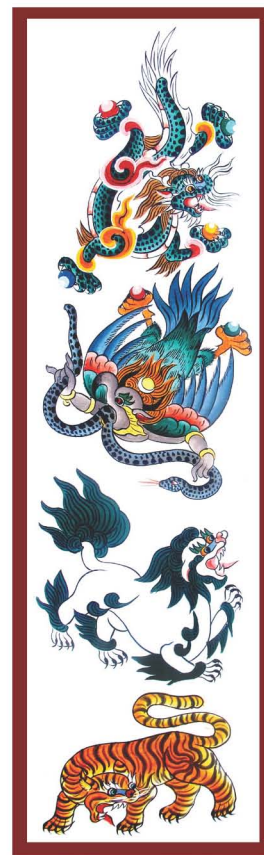
Tshering Namdru depicts six characters each of which represents longevity:

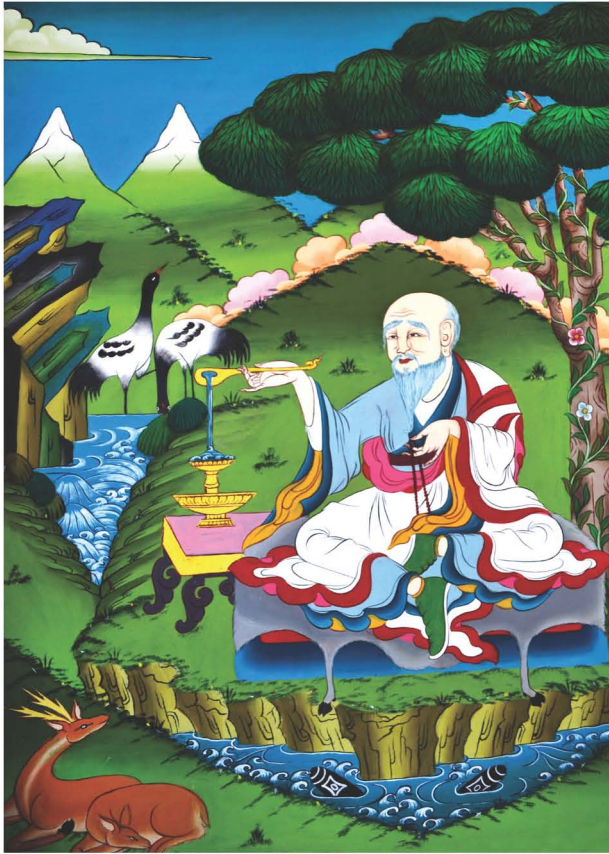
5.3.6.4.1. The Brahmin represents the contemplative sage who manifests the qualities of *Amitayus*, the Buddha of Longevity. The sage holds a crystal rosary symbolizing continuity and purity.

5.3.6.4.2. The tree of longevity under which the Brahmin sits is the divine tree endowed with many medicinal qualities.

5.3.6.4.3. The conch-shell-shaped unalterable rock has beneficial geomantic properties and it stands for rock of longevity.

5.3.6.4.4. The water that comes out of the rock is said to be pure nectar of immortality, which is contained in the





vase held by *Amitayus*. It is the water for longevity.

5.3.6.4.5. A pair of cranes found alongside the old saint symbolizes happiness and fidelity. And it is believed that the cranes have longer life spans than the other birds. The cranes symbolize the bird of longevity.

5.3.6.4 .6. It is said that deer are the only creatures capable of locating the plant of immortality. The deer therefore symbolizes the animal of longevity.

Together, these six symbols of longevity embody the natural harmony of the recluse, who, untroubled by the cares of the world, lives a long life of contentment, peace and natural wealth.

5.3.6.5. The National Emblem of Bhutan

The national emblem (*Druk gi gyaltag*) of Bhutan is used in official government publications such as letter pads, legislation and websites. The national emblem is rich in Buddhist iconography whose symbolism has had great meaning to the people of Bhutan for centuries.

Within the circle of the national emblem, two crossed *vajras* are placed over a lotus. They are flanked on either side by a male and female white dragon. A wish-fulfilling jewel is located above them. There are four other jewels inside the circle where the two vajras intersect. They



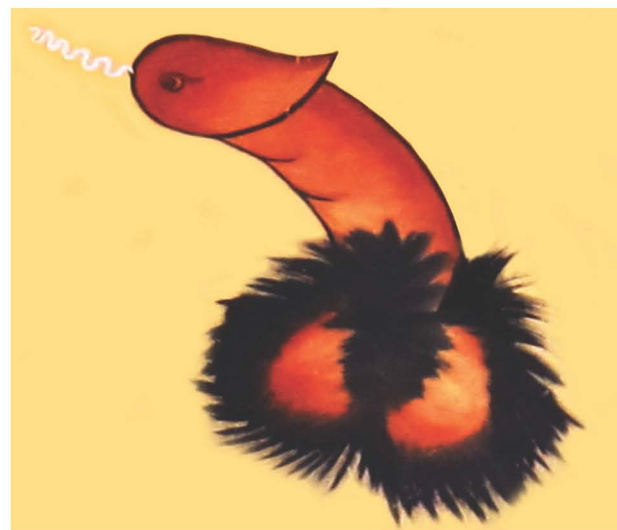
symbolize the spiritual and secular traditions of the Kingdom based on the four spiritual undertakings of Vajrayana Buddhism. The lotus symbolizes absence of defilements; the wish-fulfilling jewel symbolizes the sovereign power of the people; and the two dragons represent the name of the Kingdom.

5.3.6.6. Images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

In Bhutanese temples, we also see a wide range of religious paintings depicting the images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, various deities and saints. Each of the images has a significant meaning and conveys deep spiritual messages that are useful for our everyday lives.

5.3.6.7. Wangchuk Chenpo (Phalluses)

It is believed that images of phalluses on the walls of houses ward off evil spirits and keeps away all the



negativity that comes from outside. In Bhutan the phallus is an integral part of festive rituals observed by communities, commonly used to ward off evil spirits and counter evil. Therefore, we see them tied with the wooden dagger and hung from the four corners of the houses, nailed above the entrance, painted on the walls and carved on wood.

Numerous terms are used to express its significance

or meaning. For instance, *Kharam shing* or *Mikha*, means a piece of wood to counter the evil tongue or eye and curse. *Gulang* or *Wangchuk Chenpo*, which is a reference to Lord Shiva's potency *Wangchuk Chenpo pho taag*, meaning the male symbol of Lord Shiva, or simply *Zur shing*, meaning a piece of wood that hangs from the eaves. But contrary to the popular perception, the phallus has a world of meaning beyond its obvious symbolism to ward off evil influences.

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