
PRINCIPAL
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SYMBOLS
of
WORLD
RELIGIONS



By
Swami Harshananda

PRINCIPAL SYMBOLS OF WORLD RELIGIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The fundamental concepts of any field of knowledge which form the basis of its complicated superstructure are essentially abstract. Unless these abstract principles are made concrete by following the principle of 'From the seen to the unseen', 'From the known to the unknown', they cannot be comprehended. Herein lies the necessity and utility of symbols. We can easily illustrate this by turning to the field of geometry. After defining a point or a straight line, the teacher of geometry proceeds to represent the same on the blackboard, with the words 'Let "A" be a point' (A.), 'Let "AB" be a straight line' (A-B). He has got to use the word 'let' for the simple reason that the ideal point (which has neither length nor width) or the ideal straight line (which has only length and no width) can never be represented on the blackboard. The point or the straight line figured there is at best symbolical. Yet, an entire science of geometry is built on this 'let' and a huge building or a bridge is the practical outcome of this science! In fact, life is impossible without the use of symbols. Even language is a symbol.

If the use of symbols is thus inevitable in secular sciences, it is absolutely necessary in religion. Since religion deals with such topics as God, man, creation,

man's ultimate destiny, problems of good and evil, which are highly abstract and inscrutable, it is impossible to bring them within the reach of one's understanding without the use of appropriate symbols, emblems and imagery. However, once the central idea suggested by the symbol is comprehended, it will act as a source of inspiration giving a fillip to spiritual progress.

All religions have their symbols, often, more than one. These may be visual, like the cross or auricular, like Om. They may represent God as a Power like the Śivaliṅga, or point out the path to perfection as in the case of the Dharmacakra, or signify the saviour and his religious system as in the cross or the crucifix.

A reverent study of these symbols of the great world religions is as fascinating as it is spiritually rewarding.

HINDUISM

Praṇava (OM or AUM)



Praṇava or Om is the universally accepted symbol of Hinduism. All sections, cults and groups honour this and use this. Even Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism have adopted this. It is both an auricular and a visual symbol for Brahman, the Absolute of Hindu philosophy, and God of Hindu religion.

Literally the word 'Praṇava' means 'that by which God is effectively praised'. It also means 'that which is ever new'. The word 'Om' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'ava' which has nineteen different senses. From these it is possible to construe that Om represents that Power which (1) is omniscient;

(2) rules over the entire universe; (3) protects from the evils of life; (4) fulfils the cherished desire of its devotees and (5) destroys ignorance and gives enlightenment.

Praṇava has been extolled highly in the Vedas, the Upaniṣads and the Gītā as also in other scriptures. The Gopathabrāhmaṇa of the Atharva Veda relates a story according to which god Indra successfully overcame the demons with the help of Om. The story can be interpreted to mean that man can conquer his beastly nature by having recourse to the repetition of Om. The Yajurveda exhorts us to try to realise Brahman through repeating and remembering Om. The Kaṭhopeniṣat declares that Om is Parabrahman itself. The Muṇḍakopeniṣat advises the spiritual aspirant to meditate on the unity of the ātman (the self) with Brahman (God) using Om for japa. Śrī Kṛṣṇa avers in the Gītā that he is Om among words and that all religious rites are started with the repetition of Om. Not only that, if anyone succeeds in reciting the word Om at the time of his death, simultaneously thinking of God, he will attain the highest Truth. The Yogasūtras of Patañjali declare that praṇava is the symbol of God and that one can get samādhi on Him by its repetition, and meditation on Him.

Actually Om comprises of three independent letters a, u and m, each of which has its own meaning and significance. The letter 'a' represents 'begin-

ning' (ādīmatva); 'u' represents 'progress' (utkarṣa); 'm' represents 'limit or dissolution' (miti). Hence the word Om represents that power responsible for creation, development and dissolution of this universe, i.e., God Himself.

Swami Vivekananda has given a very simple but interesting and instructive explanation of the three letters comprising Om thereby bringing out the uniqueness of this great symbol: "The first letter A is the root sound, the key, pronounced without touching any part of the tongue or the palate; M represents the last sound in the series, being produced by closed lips; and the U rolls from the very root to the end of the sounding-board of the mouth. Thus Om represents the whole phenomenon of sound-producing. As such it must be the natural symbol, the matrix of all the various sounds. It denotes the whole range and possibility of all the words that can be made.'

The full significance of this statement becomes unfolded only when we understand the Hindu theory of creation as mentioned in the Vedas and other scriptures. This theory can be summed up as follows: (1) Creation is not a linear process, beginning and ending at particular points of time, but it is a cyclic process going on eternally; (2) God creates this universe out of Himself by Himself. To put it in a technical language, He is both the material cause and the efficient cause; (3) Before beginning

any particular cycle of creation, He utters the Vedic words denoting the various classes of beings and objects; conceives of the corresponding forms (remembering them from the previous cycles of creation) and creates them.

Contrary to the general understanding, this means that forms (rūpa) are preceded by names (nāma). Names are composed of letters which are sounds. All sounds are included in Om. Hence, the entire creation which proceeds from Vedic words or sounds, proceeds from the basic matrix of all sounds, viz., Om. Since God is the origin of this universe Om and God are identical. Or, at least, Om is the best symbol of God.

God is one. Sages call Him by various names. Though these various names differ from one another, all of them have sprung up from the same basic source of all sounds, viz., Om. Hence Om represents all names of God; or, it is the best name of God.

Sivaliṅga

The votaries of Hinduism can be divided broadly into three groups: Śaivites, Śāktas and Vaiṣṇavites. They are, respectively, the worshippers of Śiva, Śakti (Divine Mother) and Viṣṇu.

The cult of Śiva and the worship of his emblem, the liṅga, are as old as Hinduism itself. Nobody



has been able so far, to indicate any definite period during which this cult originated.

Literally Siva means auspiciousness and linga means a sign or a symbol. Hence the Sivalinga is just a symbol of the great God of the universe who is all-auspiciousness. Siva also means One in whom the whole creation sleeps after dissolution. Linga also means the same thing—a place where created objects get dissolved during the disintegration of the created universe. Since, according to Hinduism, it is the same God that creates, sustains and withdraws the universe, the Sivalinga represents symbolically God Himself.

Whether the Sivalinga is a phallic emblem or not, is a moot point. Phallic cults have existed in all countries and in all civilizations. It is quite likely that the phallic cults of an aboriginal civilization

were absorbed into Hinduism and the worship itself was elevated to honour the Father-Mother-Principle of creation. This is one view. That it is a remnant of the Vedic yūpastambha, to which sacrificial animals used to be tied, is another view. According to this view the Hindu temple is a metamorphosis of the Vedic yāgaśāla (sacrificial shed). That it is an imitation of the Buddhist stūpa is another guess that is sometimes hazarded. Since liṅgas have been discovered in the remnants of the Indus Valley Civilization (3000 B.C.) and, since the ancestors of Gautama Buddha were themselves worshippers of Śiva, this view has not gained much credence.

Since God is beyond name and form, and since we cannot conceive of an abstract principle like Him, without the aid of concrete symbols, a spherical surface or emblem is perhaps the nearest approach to Him!

Śivaliṅgas may be *cala* (movable) or *acala* (immovable). The *cala* liṅgas may be kept in the shrine of one's own home for worship, or prepared temporarily with materials like clay or dough or rice etc., for worship and dispensed with after the worship, or worn on the body as *iṣṭaliṅga* as the Viraśaivas do. The *acala* liṅgas are those installed in temples. They are usually made of stones and have three parts. The lowest part which is square is called *Brahmabhāga* and represents *Brahmā* the creator. The middle part which is octogonal is

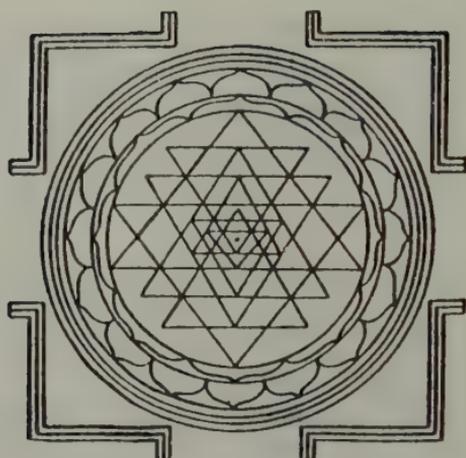
called Viṣṇubhāga and represents Viṣṇu, the sustainer. These two parts are embedded inside the pedestal. The Rudrabhāga, which is cylindrical and projects outside the pedestal is the one to which worship is offered. Hence, it is called the pūjābhāga.

The pūjābhāga also contains certain lines technically called brahmasūtra, without which the liṅga becomes unfit for worship.

Śiva is said to be fond of bhasma or the holy ash. Hence wearing the sacred ash on the forehead and other parts of the body (as tripuṇḍra) is a must for the Śaivites. The ash is normally taken from the sacred fire, gr̥hyāgni, though readymade ash is also available. It is applied as three horizontal lines. These lines are said to represent: the three aspects of Śiva, the three syllables of Om, the three Vedas, the three selves, the three worlds, the three guṇas, the three fires and the three daily oblations. Wearing the tripuṇḍra is believed to purify the votary.

Śrīcakra

The Śrīcakra is perhaps, the most important and the most widely used symbol of the Śakti cult, the cult of the votaries of the Divine Mother. If God can be conceived of as the Father in Heaven, He can as well be conceived of as the Mother Divine also. Though God is neither masculine nor feminine,



human nature being what it is, it is but natural that anthropomorphic ways of worship are resorted to in religion. Once this principle is accepted, what form of the Deity can be more fitting for worship and contemplation than that of the all-loving Divine Mother?

Even though Mother-worship is very ancient in Hinduism, the 'Father' has not been neglected! In fact, the Father-Mother-Principle is one and the same. Just as fire and its burning power or the word and its meaning cannot be separated, even so Siva and Sakti cannot be separated.

Though the three consorts of the Trinity—Sarasvatī of Brahmā the creator, Lakṣmī of Viṣṇu the protector and Pārvatī of Maheśvara, the destroyer—are the main deities in the Mother-cult, it is the various aspects of Pārvatī that are most widely used in worship, japa or contemplation. In fact,

an entire branch of Hindu religious practice, the Tantras, has developed round this Deity.

Again, Durgā, Kālī and Lalitā are the three forms of Pārvatī which are most widely used for worship. The Śrīcakra is the symbol of the Lalitā-aspect of the Divine Mother. It is essentially a yantra, a geometrical diagram representing the form-pattern of the Goddess.

The Śrīcakra consists of a dot (bindu) at the centre surrounded by nine triangles (trikoṇa), of which five have their apexes downward and the other four, upward. The mutual intersection of these nine triangles forms forty three triangles in all. This is surrounded by concentric circles with eight lotus petals and sixteen lotus petals. This again is surrounded by three more concentric circles. Finally on the outskirts, there is a square (caturasra) of three lines, the lines one inside the other, opening out in the middle of each side as four portals.

According to the Śākta Tantras, scriptures of the cult of Mother worship, the ultimate Reality is one, a transcendental Absolute which is immutable and ineffable. It is pictured as Supreme Effulgence, prakāśa. Desiring to become many, this Absolute starts reflecting on Itself. This deliberation is technically designated Vimarśa. This Vimarśa creates a throb or stir, spanda, which develops as vibration or nāda and gets concentrated to a point or bindu. This bindu, like a dicotyledonous seed

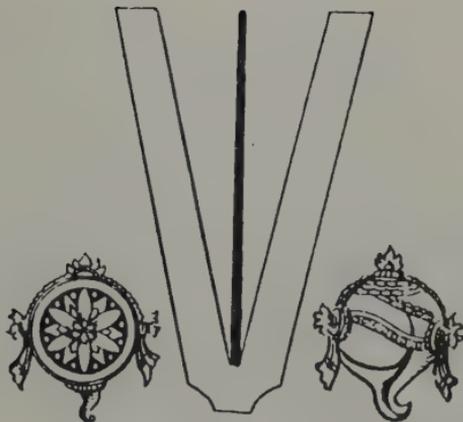
contains the Siva-Sakti principle as one clo knit unit. It then gradually swells, giving rise the polarisation of Siva (father-principle) and Sakti (mother-principle), retaining simultaneously the original latent and potent status containing the Siva-Sakti combination. These three units now form a triangle, as it were. This process goes on and on, until it results in the Śrīcakra. This is nothing but a representation of the Supreme consciousness in its various levels of evolution.

We thus see that the Śrīcakra is a symbol of the Divine, its evolution into the created universe as well as the universe itself. In other words, it represents the Absolute in all its aspects.

The Śrīcakra can be used for permanent worship either in the form of a yantra (two-dimensional engraved figure) or a meru (three-dimensional embossed figure). The *yantra* can be drawn on a Bhūrja leaf, or plates of copper, silver or gold. The most common material for the meru is the pañcaloha (alloy of five metals—gold, silver, copper, tin and lead).

Ūrdhva puṇḍra

Literally, the word means a religious mark (puṇḍra) which is worn upright (ūrdhva). In common parlance, it is called nāma. Since it has been ordained by the Vaiṣṇava scriptures that while marking the various parts of the body with the ūr-



dhvapuṇḍra, names of Lord Viṣṇu (like Keśava) are to be repeated and that the respective mark represents the respective aspect of the Deity indicated by that particular name, the word nāma (=name) has become synonymous with the ūrdhvapuṇḍra itself. Invariably associated with the Śaṅkha or the conch on its left side and the Cakra or the discus on its right side, this forms the chief symbol of the followers of Śrī Rāmānuja, who are known as Śrīvaiṣṇavas.

Lord Viṣṇu, the middle deity of the Hindu Trinity, does not seem to have had a very prominent place in the Vedas. But by the time the Bhāgavata cult developed (through its basic writings like the Nārāyaṇīya section of the Mahābhārata, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and the Pāñcarātra Āgamas as also the famous Bhāgavatam) Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa had become the most important deity of the Hindu pantheon.

The word Viṣṇu literally means one who pervades everything, one who has entered into everything. So, Viṣṇu is the Cosmic Spirit, the Absolute, which pervades everything. For purposes of religious worship and meditation, He is described as endowed with a beautiful form, deep blue in colour. He has four arms wearing śaṅkha (conch), cakra (discus), gadā (mace) and padma (lotus). He wears a jewel, Kaustubha, on His chest. Single-minded devotion is the easiest and best means to please Him.

The followers of Viṣṇuism can be broadly divided into two groups: the Sadvaiṣṇavas (or Vaiṣṇavas who are followers of Śrī Madhvācārya) and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. Both of them accept Lord Viṣṇu as the Supreme Deity and devotion to Him as the Chief means of attaining spiritual beatitude. Śaṅkha and cakra as the religious symbol are acceptable to both of them. However, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas add the Ūrdhvapūṇḍra also.

The śaṅkha or the conch has the form of a multiple spiral evolving from one point into ever-increasing spheres. It thus symbolises the origin of the universe from a single source, viz., God. Being found in water, it symbolises the causal waters from which the universe was evolved and into which it gets dissolved. When blown, it produces a sound, which represents the primeval sound from which creation developed. It is also taken to be the representation of the Cosmic Ego. Its involute curve,

can represent, on the plane of the microcosm, or the individual, the egoism which involves him in saṁsāra or transmigratory existence.

The cakra or the discus represents the Universal Mind, the unlimited power that creates and destroys all the spheres and forms of the universe, the nature of which is to revolve or to change. It also represents the Lord's will to multiply. Its six spokes represent the six seasons of the year, hence the changing universe, set on the unchanging axle, the pivot, represented by the magic syllable hrīm of the Lord. The circle round the wheel is māyā, the divine power of illusion. On the microcosmic plane, it can be taken to be a true representation of the individual's mind, which is ever changing like the rotating wheel.

The Hindu religious tradition has always insisted upon its followers to wear religious marks appropriate to their faith, on their bodies, especially on the forehead. Ūrdhvapuṇḍra is one such mark. The meaning and significance of this symbol is rather obscure to discover. When marked on the forehead of the Deity in a temple, it may signify the power of that Deity to *uplift* the votaries. When marked on the forehead of the votary it may remind him of the need to take a spiritually *upward* path. It is sometimes interpreted that the two lines on the outside represent the idā and piṅgalā (the two passages for the flow of prāṇic energy, intertwining the

backbone) and the middle line (marked in red or yellow colour) represents the suṣumnā passage (through which the kuṇḍalinī power flows after awakening). The three together represent the yogic path of spiritual ascent.

So, the total symbol (the Ūrdhvapuṇḍra along with the śaṅkha and the cakṛa) may mean that one who aspires after controlling the mind and subjugating the egosim should take to the propitiation of the Deity's merciful power or to the Yogic path.

The Ūrdhvapuṇḍra is marked as  by the Vaḍagalais (the 'Northerners') and as  by the teṅgalais (the 'Southerners').

Clay, white or yellow, is used for marking the outer lines and turmeric or śrīcūrṇa (a kind of red powder) for marking the central line.

Other Symbols

During the long history of Hinduism a good number of objects have acquired the significance of religious symbols, only a few of which will be dealt with here.

Aśvattha

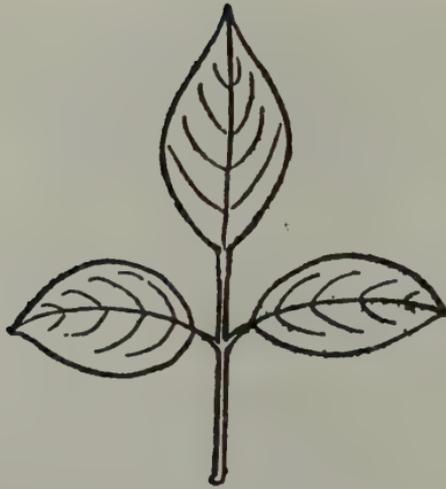
The Aśvattha (*Fiscus religiosa*), the holy fig tree, is said to have issued forth from Indra and is con-



sidered to be the best of trees. The eternal tree of life with its branches below (in this world) and the roots above (in God) is described as an Aśvattha in the Hindu scriptures. There is a celestial Aśvattha tree under which the gods gather. So, the holy men, gods on earth, are fond of sitting under an Aśvattha tree. It is supposed to be endowed with magical powers. Childless women worship it and circumambulate it with the hope and faith of being granted children. Its wood is made use of, for preparing the sacrificial fire (through araṇi).

Bilva Leaf

The Bilva-leaf, the leaf of the tree *Aegle marmelos* has long been associated with the worship of Śiva and his consort. It represents his vegetal form and is said to be very dear to him. Amulets prepared out of bilva leaves are believed to be endowed with supernatural powers. Medicines prepared out of the unripe bilva fruit are said to be very efficacious



cures for certain diseases. A pledge taken over the bilva leaf is too sacred to be broken.

Bull or Nandī

Nandī ('the happy one'), the bull on which Lord Siva rides is another common symbol. It represents virility and strength, the animal in man. In Siva temples, there is always a recumbent bull placed in front of the chief shrine or just outside it,



with the head turned away from the deity but the gaze fixed on it. It is interpreted as the *jīvātman*, the individual soul, with its animal nature pulling it away from God, but His grace pulling him back to Him. According to some, it symbolises *dharma* or the moral law.

Cow

The cow has been held very sacred by the Hindus, for ages. It is an offspring of the celestial cow *Kāmadhenu*, which was created by *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* from



his own body. Another version of Hindu mythology makes it a product of the churning of the milky ocean. The earth is often pictured as approaching God in the form of a cow. All the gods are supposed to be inhabiting its various limbs. The *pañcagavya* (five products from the cow, viz., milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung) is considered to be a sacred pre-

paration used in expiatory rites. Gifting a cow is considered to be of great merit and killing a cow to be a heinous sin.

Elephant

The elephant is another symbol often met with in Hindu culture. By an analysis of the original Sanskrit word *gaja*, it is taken to be God Himself (ja=



place of origin or birth of the universe; ga = the goal to be reached ultimately). Often used as a royal mount, it signifies royal power and might.

Kumbha or Kalāśa

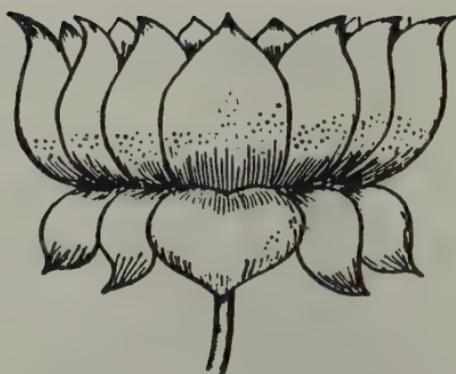
The *kumbha* or *kalaśa*, a pot filled with water and decorated with coconut and leaves is very often used in ritualistic worship. It forms the body as it were, of the deity invoked for worship. Apart from being considered as a sign of auspiciousness, it is also used as a symbol of the Divine Mother. One of the important methods of conferring great



honour on a guest is to receive him with a pūr-
ṇakumbha.

Lotus

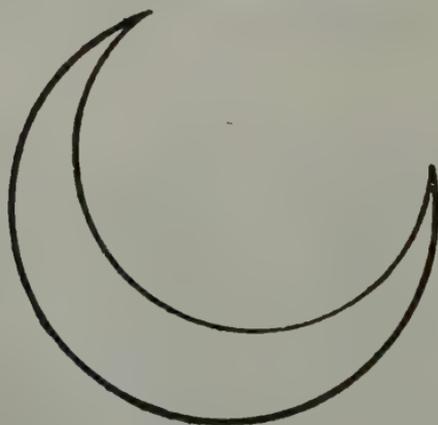
The lotus bud is born in water and unfolds itself into a beautiful flower. Hence it is taken as the symbol of the universe coming out of the primeval waters and manifesting itself in all its glory. It is also taken as a symbol of the sun. It rises from the navel of Viṣṇu and is the seat of Brahmā the creator. Hence the sacredness associated with it.



Psychic centres in the body associated with the rising of the kuṇḍalinī power are pictured like lotuses.

Moon

The moon is said to be one of the byproducts thrown up by the milky ocean when churned by the gods and demons for the sake of the amṛta or nectar. Hence it is considered to be the bowl containing the amṛta from which the ancestors and gods drink.



Being the 'ruler of the world of the stars' it is also the symbol of the world beyond death. It also represents the Cosmic Mind, the mind of Virāṭ-puruṣa, the sum-total of created objects. It is often considered as the dwelling place of the ancestors.

Sālagrāma

The Sālagrāma, a blackish rounded stone with a hole, is worshipped as an emblem of Viṣṇu. It is normally found in the bed of the river Gaṇḍakī (in North Bihar). Inside the hole are visible, spirals which remind one, of the cakra or the discus of Viṣṇu. Though eighty nine varieties are known to exist, only fourteen or nine are more common. They are never installed in temples but, worshipped in one's own home privately. Once a Sālagrāma is kept in a house, its worship, though simple, becomes obligatory. It is supposed to be endowed with mysterious powers. Even possessing and worshipping it will confer certain permanent benefits.



Sun

The importance of the sun to the Vedic Āryans cannot be over-emphasised if we accept the theory that they lived in the North-polar region. Being the giver of life, light and energy, the sun has naturally become a symbol of the creator. The famous

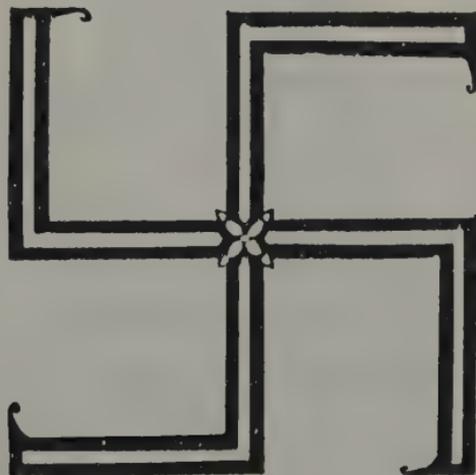


Gāyatrī mantra has been addressed to God the creator in and through the orb of the sun. The sun can also represent the cosmic sacrifice from which the whole creation has proceeded. The Upaniṣads sometimes describe it as the celestial door leading to immortality.

Svastika

The Svastika is a symbol of auspiciousness (svasti= auspiciousness). It has been used as a symbol of the sun or of Viṣṇu. It also represents

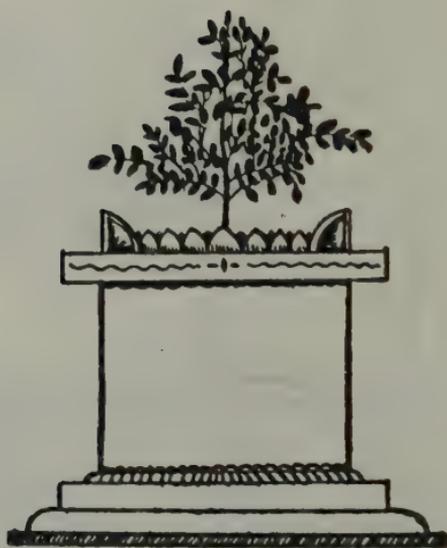
the world-wheel, the eternally changing world, round a fixed, unchanging centre or God. Svastika marks depicted on doors or walls of



buildings or on animals, are believed to protect them from the wrath of evil spirits or furies of nature.

Tulasī

The Tulasī leaves and plant (*ocimum sanctum*), supposed to have been born at the time of the churning of the milky ocean, are considered to be dear to Lord Viṣṇu and are often identified with his consort Lakṣmī. Its presence in the courtyard of a house in a Bṛndāvana is believed to ward off the messengers of death. It is considered to be a purifier of sins; hence, its twigs are used in the funeral pyre. It is



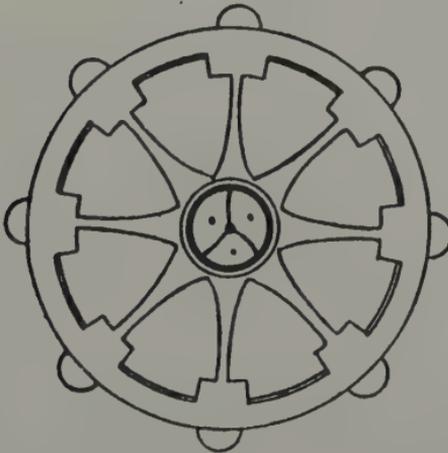
also well-known for its medicinal properties. Some purāṇas (Hindu mythological scriptures) go to the extent of telling that all gods and places of pilgrimage inhere in it.

BUDDHISM

Dharmacakra

The Dharmacakra or the 'Wheel of the Law' is the most important symbol of Buddhism.

Prince Gautama or Siddhārtha of the Śākya clan was born in 623 B.C. (or 560 B.C.) at Lumbiṇī in Nepal, renounced the world at the age of 29, and after intense spiritual struggles spread over six years, got enlightenment under the fig tree (Bodhi tree) near Gayā (in Bihār, India) and became 'the Buddha' (the illumined one). Desiring to distribute the



spiritual wealth he had acquired, to the suffering humanity, he sojourned to Vārāṇasī (Banāras, India) and delivered his first sermon at Sārnāth to five

ascetics who had sought him for spiritual guidance. This sermon has since become famous as 'Dharma-cakra-pravartana'.

Dharma is the law which accomplishes the greatest good of the greatest number. In the individual's life it becomes manifest as good and noble conduct. Cakra means the 'wheel', and pravartana means 'setting in motion'. The wheel of eternal, cosmic, law, though ever in motion, appears to slow down a little, seems to get bogged down a little in certain periods of the history of man-kind. At such critical periods Kṛṣṇas, Buddhas or Christs have to come to set it rolling once again. This is exactly what Gautama Buddha did, when he delivered his first sermon, preaching the greatest truth he had discovered in his life.

Though the four Noble Truths—which are now part and parcel of the religious history of the world—constitute the essence of dharma according to Buddhism, it is the last of these truths, the eight-fold path (ārya aṣṭāṅgika mārga), that really forms the spokes of the Wheel of Dharma as it were. (The Buddhist Wheel of Dharma has eight spokes). The Wheel cannot survive without the spokes. Even so, dharma cannot be sustained without the practice of these eight virtues viz., right view (samyak dṛṣṭi), right resolution (samyak saṅkalpa), right speech (samyak vāk), right conduct (samyak kriyā), right means of livelihood (samyak ājīva),

right effort (samyak vyāyāma), right mindfulness (samyak smṛti) and right concentration (samyak samādhi).

It is said that the Buddha himself drew on the ground, with grains of rice, the picture of a wheel, an ancient Indian symbol which signifies the rounds of births and deaths due to karma, and which man himself keeps in motion through his thirst (tanhā) for life. Later Buddhists developed the wheel as an explicit symbol. Apart from the eight spokes of the wheel, representing the eightfold path, at its hub are sometimes shown the three causes of pain—the serpent of illwill, the pig of ignorance, and the cock of lust.

The wheel may also symbolise a constantly changing universe, the impermanence of everything in the world.

JAINISM

The Svastika and the Cakra

The Svastika and the Cakra are the symbols frequently used in Jainism. A symbol recently adopted, during the 2500th death anniversary of Mahāvīra, is more comprehensive. It consists of a digit of the moon, three dots, the Svastika and the palm of a hand with the cakra inset.



Jainism is a very ancient religion. It is the religion founded by the 'Jinas' or conquerors, also known as tīrthaṅkaras or founders of the faith, men of perfection who have mastered themselves. These jinas are said to be 24 in number. But only Pārśvanātha (700 B.C.) and Vardhamāna Mahā-

vīra (599 B.C.), the last two of these, have been accepted by modern historians to have definitely existed.

All living beings are souls, eternal and immortal. They have got into bondage due to karma. They can get liberation (mokṣa) by following the 'three jewels' (ratnatraya) viz., right faith, right knowledge and right conduct. This is the gist of Jaina religious teaching.

Human beings, suffering due to kārmic bondage, need not be disheartened, since there is a way out. The palm of the hand signifies this assurance: 'Do not be afraid!' What is the suggested way out of this morass? Dharma. The Wheel of Dharma with 24 spokes represents the dharma consisting of ahimsā (non-injury) and other virtues taught by the 24 tīrthaṅkaras.

Svasti means auspiciousness. Svastika is a symbol of auspiciousness. Nothing but good will befall those who take refuge at the dharma taught by the tīrthaṅkaras.

The three dots represent the three worlds—in the nether region, middle region and upper region—along with all the living beings.

The digit of the moon represents the region beyond the three worlds wherein reside the perfected beings.

The symbol in effect means that the denizens of the three worlds who are suffering from the miseries

of transmigratory existence, can have recourse to the path of dharma shown by the tīrthāṅkaras, thereby bringing about auspiciousness for themselves and after obtaining perfection, will live for ever in the world of perfected beings.

SIKHISM

Swords, Dagger and Shield

This is the symbol of Sikhism, the youngest of world religions, founded by Guru Nānak (1469-1538 A.D.). Nānak was followed by nine more teachers, the last being Guru Govind Singh (1666-1708 A.D.). He declared that after him, the Book —‘Granth’ or ‘Granth Sāhib’ consisting of the Ādigranth and the Daśam-granth, a compilation of the teachings of the Sikh gurus and other holy men —will take the place of the guru.

Sikhism teaches that God is one and that He can be easily pleased by devoted repetition of His name.



Obedience and submission to the guru brings release from transmigratory existence.

Guru Govind Singh, the last (and perhaps the most dynamic) of the Sikh gurus, established a new order of militant Sikhs out of his meek and mild followers. On the first day of Vaiśākh (second month of the Hindu calendar) 1699, the guru declared, in a large meeting of his followers with the naked sword in hand, that he wanted five men who would offer their heads to him 'here and now!' Though the whole assembly was stunned by the unusual behaviour of the guru, slowly, five men walked up to him one after another, ready for the great sacrifice. The guru called them the *Khalsa*, 'the pure', 'his very own', and baptised them with water stirred by their daggers. Henceforward, the Sikhs ('*Śiṣyas*' or followers) would all be of one community with no distinctions of caste or sex. The men would wear the five '*Kakas*', the *Keś* (un-cut hair), the *Kāca* (short drawers) *Kara* (iron bangle), the *Kirpān* (steel dagger) and the *Kaṅgha* (comb). They should always be ready to fight, and if necessary, even to sacrifice their all, for *dharma*.

The swords, the shield and the dagger represent the martial spirit of the community. They signify that a Sikh must be prepared to fight and even sacrifice his life in defence of his *dharma* or faith.

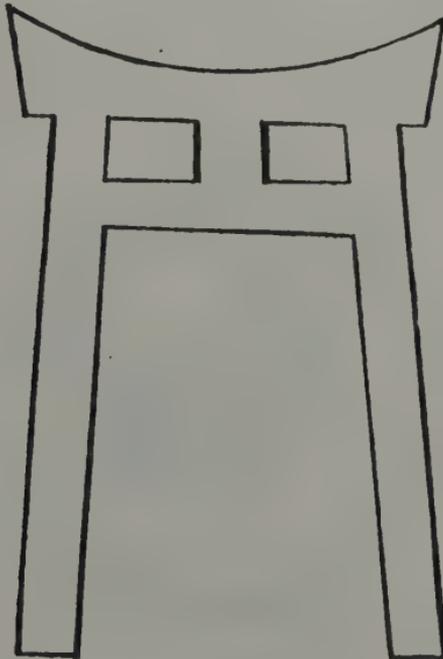
SHINTOISM

Torii or Tori-Wi

This is the symbol of Shintoism, the ancient and native faith of Japan. The word 'Shinto' is derived from 'Shen-Tao' which means the 'Way of the gods'.

Shintoism is described more as a complex of ancient beliefs and observances which have remained comparatively unchanged, than as a religious system having any philosophy or rituals. It is inspired more by love and gratitude than by fear.

It accepts the Sun-goddess, the Food-goddess and the God of earth as the three greatest gods who



are beneficent. Gods of fire, thunder and rain-storm are malignant deities who have to be propitiated by offerings.

Shinto mythology gives a very interesting story which contains the origin of the symbol Torii. The heaven illuminating Sun-goddess Amaterasu, being unable to bear the distress caused by her brother 'the Swift-impetuous', the master of the ocean, hid herself in a cave. The whole world was therefore engulfed in darkness. The sweet music of birds perching on the branch of a tree which was very near the mouth of the cave brought the Sun-goddess out, out of curiosity, thus saving the whole world! Hence it became a custom to erect gate-frames, resembling bird-perches, at Shinto temples.

These gate-frames in their simplest form consist of two vertical posts supporting two horizontal ones. Originally made of unpainted tree trunks, modern Torii are often more elaborate. They may be made of concrete or bronze, and are often painted in bright red and black. Each main Shinto temple usually has three Torii, the first one marking the entrance to the sacred precinct, the other two spaced on the main road to the honden (the most important building in the Shinto temple, being the sanctuary in which the Kami or the deity resides). Only the priests can enter this sanctuary. Torii are sometimes used to mark the sacred character of some natural or man-made objects.

ISLAM

The Crescent and the Star

Islam which belongs to Judaic tradition, is dead against all symbols. Since the average man is unable to think without the aid of symbols, a few symbols have come to stay. The sacred calligraphy, the credal formula of the Muslims, taken from the Qur'ān itself, is the one widely in use. The picture of the sacred shrine at Mecca, containing the holy Kaaba stone, is another. 'The Crescent and the Star' is however a very popular symbol most widely used. However, none of



these symbols as such, is worshipped or honoured in a ceremonial way.

The Crescent and Star, originally associated with moon worship, was a symbol used in Byzantium (395-1453 A.D.). When the Ottoman Turks conquered the Byzantine empire they borrowed it as a military symbol. Gradually it came to be accepted as a symbol of Islamic culture. It often appears on the flags of Muslim states, stamps, as also on the spires of mosques.

Even as the crescent moon, a waxing moon, gives cool and soothing light to a weary traveller on the hot sands of Arabia and the stars guide him towards his destination, the religion of Islam also gives cool light and solace to the weary traveller on the scorched paths of worldly life and guides him towards Allāh, the Supreme God. Like the waxing moon, its effect will gradually increase. This is one possible explanation on the symbol sometimes offered by modern Muslim scholars.

CHRISTIANITY

The Cross

The Cross is one of the oldest of symbols, found in almost all civilizations of the world. After Jesus the Christ sacrificed his life on the Cross, it has become the perfect symbol of the Christian religion.

During the times when Christ lived, death on the cross by crucifixion was commonplace for criminals and was considered to be particularly ignominious. Christ was condemned for treason and was treated like a criminal. He was forced to carry the heavy cross on which he was later crucified. Dur-



ing this last journey he had to undergo a lot of suffering and this is known as the Passion of Christ in Christian theology.

But, by dying on the cross Christ raised it from ignominy to glory for all time. It represents the self-sacrifice and redemptive love of Christ for mankind. It has also become identified with the Christian religion and the Christian Church.

There are various forms of the cross out of which the Greek Cross, the Latin Cross and the Calvary or Graded Cross are more frequently used. In the Greek Cross, the vertical and the cross bars are of equal length and it is taken to represent the Church of Christ rather than his passion. The Latin Cross has a longer upright and the shorter cross bar is fixed in such a way that, at the intersection, the upper and the two horizontal arms are all of equal length. The lower arm is conspicuously longer. This Cross symbolises the Passion of Christ. Very often a crucified figure of Christ is attached to this Cross when it is called the Crucifix. The Calvary Cross stands on three steps which signify faith, hope and love. This is symbolic of finished redemption, of Christ risen from the dead and reigning from the throne in heaven.

The Christians believe that no tree will suffer defilement by lending itself to be fashioned into the Cross of Christ except the ilex or Holly oak which was the wood of the original Cross and which also

supplied the thorny leaves for Christ's crown of thorns. It is also believed that the original Cross rested upon the skull and bones of Adam implying thereby that through the Cross all men may be saved.

JUDAISM

The Menorah

The Menorah or the seven-limbed candelabrum is the most typical and important of the symbols of Judaism, the religion of the Hebrews or Jews. Judaism has survived to this day because of its monotheistic philosophy and the deep faith of its followers that they are a chosen race, destined ultimately to conquer and rule the entire world. The Old Testament is its basic scripture and the Ten Commandments contain the cardinal ethical principles.

The Menorah is a representation of the creation of the world by God. According to the Genesis of the Old Testament, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. The middle light indicates the Sabbath (last day of the



week, a holy day and a day of rest). The seven branches may also represent the seven heavens created by God.

The first Jewish Temple built by the King Solomon (983 B.C.) contained ten golden Menorahs and the second (516 B.C.) only one. The light of the candles symbolises the presence of God or Shekinah, within the temple. It is believed that the light in the Original Temple was never extinguished until the Shekinah withdrew of His own accord in anticipation of its destruction.

The Menorahs used in the modern Jewish temples have either less or more than seven branches since the Jews feel that the original Menorah should never be duplicated. Only, the Reform Temples of modern day Judaism use the seven-limbed Menorah freely.

The Menorah stands at the far western area of the sanctuary, before the Holy of the holies.

Every Jewish Temple contains one or two Menorahs on the altar.

For the Jews, the Menorah with its golden branches and flaming candles signifies the undying and inexhaustible spirit of Judaism.

The 'Magen David' (The Star of David), a six-pointed star representing the six tribes of Israel, is another symbol, though less known, often used by the Jews.

ZOROASTRIANISM

The Cauldron of Fire

This is the symbol of Zoroastrianism, popularly known as the Pārsī religion.

Spitama Zāratuṣtra or Zoroaster (period not definitely known—anywhere between 1300 and 660 B.C.) lived in Eastern Iran. He received divine inspiration from Āhura Māzda (the wise Lord, God) Himself and taught his religion till the ripe old age of seventy seven, when he was martyred by the Turanian invaders.

As against the primitive animism and blood sacrifices, he taught the religion of One God, Āhura Māzda (or Ormazd), who was the champion of the ideal life. The essence of this religion is humata (good thoughts), hookta (good words) and hvarshta (good deeds).



When Āhura Māzda revealed Himself to Zoroaster and gave him the teachings and the command, Zoroaster asked Him to give him a symbol. Fire was the symbol given since it burns away all evil and it can never be made impure.

The maintenance of a sacred fire in Fire Temples called Atar-Beheram without allowing it to be extinguished, is an important feature of Zoroastrianism. It is treated like a king, with a crown hung over it. The cauldron itself may be about three feet in diameter and four feet high. The priests feed it five times a day at prescribed hours. Offering of sandalwood is considered to be especially meritorious for the donors. Ash taken from the sacred fire is used for applying on the forehead by the devout worshippers.

Fire, to the Zoroastrian, represents God and typifies the divine spark within.



Āhura Māzda is often pictorially represented like an old man with a cap and a beard, as also wings.

TAOISM

The Tai-Chi

The theory of the Yin, the Yang and the Tao owes its origin, or systematisation, to Lao Tse, a Chinese philosopher who is placed in the early part of the 7th century B.C. Lao Tse ('The Old Master') is said to have resigned from his job of keeper of the library of the royal court and gone out of the country in disgust on a black ox. At the request of the keeper of the pass at the frontier, he is said to have written the great book, 'Tao Te Ching' ('classic of the way and its virtue').

Tao (the Absolute) is the unchanging unity underlying the changing plurality. It is the first



all-embracing principle from which all things are produced. It is an indescribable which exists by itself.

As opposed to this, all things in this phenomenal world result from the interaction of two opposite but complementary principles, viz., the Yin and the Yang. The former is the negative, passive, destructive principle considered to be feminine. The latter is the positive, active, constructive, principle considered to be masculine.

The Tai Chi or 'the Great Ultimate' is pictured as a circle comprised of two parts: one dark, representing Yin and the other white, representing Yang. The dark area contains a white spot and the white area contains a black spot, thereby indicating that no element is absolutely positive or negative, and each inheres in the other. The entire diagram is surrounded by a circle representing the Tao or the Absolute.



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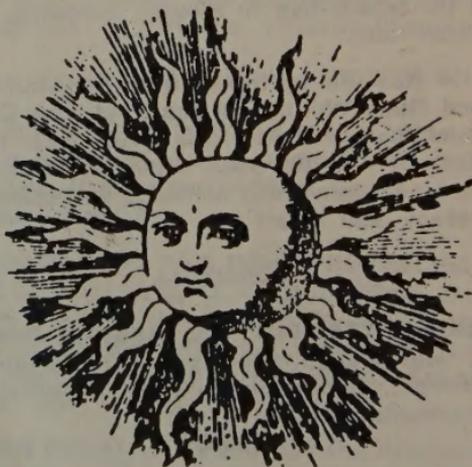
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