

Lecture 59: Symbols of Tibetan Buddhist Art

Mr Chairman and Friends,

As you have just heard, we come this evening to the fifth lecture in our series, 'An Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism'; and we are having this series, we are having this course on Tibetan Buddhism specifically, because of the very definite interest which does exist, amongst some people, in this particular subject, this particular branch as we may say, of the total Buddhist tradition. As you've just heard, we've completed already four lectures in this series, which means that we are half way through the total course. So this might be a good point at which, not only to recapitulate a little, but also to take stock of our position generally, especially as the whole course, the whole series of lectures falls quite naturally into two halves. The first four lectures, as already just mentioned, were first of all on 'How Buddhism Came to Tibet'. Then on 'The Schools of Tibetan Buddhism'. Thirdly on 'The Dalai Lama; his reincarnations', and fourthly, and lastly, the subject we had last week, 'Monks and Laymen in Buddhist Tibet'.

Now these four talks which we've had so far form, as it were, a single group. They're all inter-related, they're all interconnected on a single plane, a single level, as it were, because they're all in character mainly historical and, as it were, institutional. If I may say so, all in a sense a trifle exoteric.

Now the remaining four lectures of the series, these will be on first, 'The Symbols of Tibetan Buddhist Art'. Secondly, on 'The Four Foundation Yogas of the Tibetan Tantra'. Thirdly on 'Tibetan Buddhist Meditation', and then finally we consider the subject of 'The Future of Tibetan Buddhism'.

And just as the first four lectures formed a, more or less, self-contained group, mainly dealing with the historical and institutional aspect of Tibetan Buddhism, in the same way the second four lectures also form a sort of natural group, but this time the emphasis, the interest if you like, is more specifically religious and practical; even in a sense a trifle more - in the case of one or two lectures at least - esoteric; and it may therefore well be that the second series of four is of greater interest to some people at least, than the first series of four in the total course.

Now today we are concerned with the subject of the Symbols of Tibetan Buddhist Art. Many of you, if not most of you, I'm sure, have seen examples of Tibetan Buddhist art, either Tibetan painted scrolls - rather colourful objects which the Tibetans call Thangkas - ritual implements like dorjes and bells and so on; and it may be that you've been able to appreciate them as art, appreciate and admire their beautiful colours, shapes and so on, but you may not have been able to understand the underlying symbolism of these particular works of art, and for this reason, on account of its lack of acquaintance with the symbolism, perhaps you've been unable to appreciate the religious significance of these works of Tibetan Buddhist art. And therefore it is hoped that this lecture may help to throw just a little light into what is perhaps, from the Western point of view, one of the darkest corners of Tibetan Buddhism.

Now before we start, just a few words in general about Tibetan Buddhist art generally speaking. Tibetan Buddhism itself as we saw at the very beginning of this series, is a direct continuation of

Indian Buddhism. It's almost as though Indian Buddhism when it died in India itself was reborn, took a new birth, a new incarnation if you like, on the soil of Tibet. And just as Tibetan Buddhism is a continuation of the Indian Buddhism, in the same way Tibetan Buddhist art is a direct continuation mainly of Indian Buddhist artistic traditions. Speaking more specifically, we may say that Tibetan Buddhist art, Tibetan Buddhist religious art, because as we shall see there is no other practically, continues the Indian Buddhist artistic traditions of the Pala dynasty. The Pala dynasty representing the last phase of Indian Buddhism, the most highly developed phase of Indian Buddhism in eastern India right down to about twelve or thirteen hundred AD. And especially, we may say, Tibetan Buddhism continued that Indian Buddhist Pala dynasty artistic tradition in matters of iconography, the way in which images, the way in which Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and dakinis, and so on, and Dharmapalas, are depicted. Apart from the Indian influence, there is admittedly some Nepalese Buddhist influence on the art of Buddhist Tibeta, but then Nepalese Buddhist art itself was very deeply influenced by the Pala dynasty Indian art traditions.

As for Chinese influence that, we may say, is very secondary. The Chinese influence on Tibetan Buddhist art shows itself mainly in matters of detail and in the applied arts. For instance, if we look at the thangkhas, the painted scrolls, then we shall see that the iconography of the main figure or figures - the colour in which they are represented, whether red or blue or green, the implements which they bear, the type of expression, the various gestures, the ritual implements, the insignia, the emblems - these are all strictly determined by the Indian Buddhist iconographical traditions. But the details; when it comes to little things like the way in which you paint mountains or clouds or streams or waterfalls or fruits or flowers, these things reflect very definitely Chinese artistic tradition. So that one finds in the thangka for instance, which is one of the main expressions of Tibetan Buddhist art, one finds in the thangka a very charming sort of contrast. One finds the Indian tradition reflected in the iconography, the main figure or figures - even their features, even their expressions, and one finds side by side with this Chinese influence reflected in the natural objects like the flowers and the fruit and the streams and the mountains and especially perhaps the clouds. Chinese influence, as one might have expected is much more pronounced in those thangkhas and others specimens of religious art produced in eastern Tibet in the areas adjacent to China itself. So far as decorative art is concerned one finds that many Chinese art motifs have been incorporated into the Tibetan tradition. For instance one finds almost everywhere in Tibetan Buddhist applied art the well known Chinese symbols of the phoenix and the dragon. The phoenix of course represents the yin principle, the dragon represents the yang principle. The yin principle, that is to say the cold, dark, negative feminine principle, and the dragon representing the yang, the bright, the hot, the positive, the masculine principle. And these two - the phoenix and the dragon - symbolising the yin and the yang forces in the universe - there are represented in Tibetan art exactly as in Chinese art itself. There's no difference at all. Whether they appear woven into carpets or carved into the woodwork of shrines, the Tibetan phoenix and the Tibetan dragon exactly reproduce their original Chinese prototypes.

So that we may say if we want to generalise about Tibetan Buddhist art that it is a sort of blending, a sort of fusion of Indian and Chinese elements. If you want to go a bit farther than this we may say that the specifically religious component of the art is Indian, whereas the secular component tends to be Chinese. In many examples, in many specimens of Tibetan Buddhist art,

these two components, the religious and the secular, the Indian and the Chinese, these exist side by side, but sometimes in the best examples, in the supreme examples of Tibetan Buddhist art, one gets a perfect fusion, a perfect blending, a mutual assimilation as it were, of these Indian and these Chinese elements. And then one may say one gets Tibetan art at its best, at its most perfect, and then it is neither Indian nor Chinese, nor both together, but specifically and uniquely and distinctively and characteristically Tibetan. One may say at the same time though that the original Tibetan contribution is rather meagre. Tibetan Buddhist art draws its religious inspiration from India; its secular, more specifically aesthetic inspiration from China; it fuses them into something unique, something perhaps incomparable, but it derives very little, it draws very little from purely indigenous sources.

One may say perhaps that the original Tibetan contribution to Tibetan Buddhist art is represented principally by two things: One, is Tibetan religious architecture. For instance there is the very well known, the most wonderful example of the Potala, the palace or the monastery or temple - it's all three combined - of the Dalai Lama at Lhasa. This was originally of course a secular building. It was originally a sort of castle of the kings of Tibet, but it was transformed by the great fifth Dalai Lama and his Prime Minister into something much more characteristically, much more definitely, Tibetan. The sort of thing which we all know, which we are all familiar with from photographs and pictures. The style of architecture which one finds in Tibet was, of course, determined to a great extent by climatic conditions. Tibet is a very very cold place. It's a place of terrific winds and so on, so one needs protection from these things. And at the same time the nature of the Tibetan religious architecture was determined or is determined by the nature of the materials available. It's probably not generally realised that in Tibet, whereas one has plenty of stone and plenty of rock for building purposes, one has very very little wood indeed. The greater part of Tibet is completely non-forested. One just has a few bushes, a few shrubs but very very few trees. So wood is not used generally for building purposes. It's not used for fuel. For fuel they usually burn cakes made of yak's dung. So this factor also plays its part; the fact that stone is available in vast quantities but hardly any wood.

So one sees these two facts contributing to determine some of the most distinctive features of the Tibetan religious architecture. To begin with you find enormously thick walls. Some of the walls I'm told are ten and twelve and fifteen feet thick, like the thickest of our castle walls in Europe, and this is to keep out the cold and to keep out the frost and the damp. And at the same time the lines are usually very very simple. The Tibetans are rather fond of vertical lines which slope slightly inwards, and they are also fond of flat roofs, and this is the sort of basic pattern, the basic scheme. And when one gets these most characteristic of all religious buildings, the monasteries or gompas, and when one finds them built up in the mountains, sometimes on crags and spurs of rock, when one sees them rising out of the rock, rising out of the mountain, it's just as though the gompa, the monastery is just a sort of natural growth of the mountain. It's as though it had grown straight up out of the living rock. You can't see really where the mountain ends and where the monastery begins. This is true of the Potala, perhaps above all but it's also true of practically all the monasteries and temples and gompas generally in Tibet. They seem to be, at least from a distance continuations of the mountains themselves.

And this particular feature, this particular characteristic of Tibetan religious architecture is brought out very well in a number of paintings by Lama Anagarika Govinda. I'm sure most of you have heard his name; many of you I know have read either his 'Foundations of Tibetan

Mysticism' or his 'Way of the White Clouds' - he is well known as a writer, but not so many people are aware of the fact that Lama Govinda is not only a very great writer on Buddhism, but also a very great Buddhist artist, and inasmuch as he has sojourned for quite a while in Tibet and been fascinated by the Tibetans seen generally, quite a number of his paintings, which are usually in pastels, depict these magnificent, rather barren, rocky Tibetan landscapes, with these magnificent monasteries or gompas - at heights many many thousands of feet above sea level - 'growing', as it were out of the living rock of the mountains. And this fact as he has represented, as he has depicted it, seems to possess a very deep symbolical significance of its own. It isn't as though religion, the religious life, the monastic life, is sort of 'stuck on to' the secular life, so that you can see where the two join, you can see the crack as it were. It isn't like that. It's as though the one grows up quite naturally out of the other as the sort of culmination and perfection of the other. And looking at these paintings of Lama Govinda showing these mountains, showing the gompas on them one gets this sort of feeling, this sort of impression veryvery strongly indeed. One can see that same sort of thing if one looks not just at paintings of this kind but even at ordinary photographs taken by travellers and visitors, of the great monastic shrines of Tibet. One can see the way in which their lines continue the lines of the mountains, so that, as I've said, the buildings seem to grow out of the rock itself. So this we may say is the first original indigenous Tibetan contribution to Tibetan Buddhist art. The religious, especially the monastic architecture.. This is specifically Tibetan. This owes nothing to India. This owes nothing to China.

And secondly, the second indigenous Tibetan contribution, we may mention the remarkable colour sense of the Tibetans. The remarkable awareness of and sensitivity to colour, especially as shown, especially as represented by the thangka paintings, the Tibetan painted scrolls. In the course of the first lecture when I was speaking about Tibet generally, about the general conditions that prevail there, I mentioned the remarkable clarity of the atmosphere. Apparently when you get 12,000 feet above sea level, as you do when you got to Tibet, when you emerge through the passes which lead from India in to Tibet, when you're at this height of 12,000 feet or more above sea level, you rise as it were not only above the mountains, not only above the clouds, but above all the impurities which we usually encounter in the atmosphere. You rise above, of course, fog and smoke and smog and smutch and things of this sort, and you find yourself, perhaps for the first time in your life, in a completely clear, a completely crystalline, atmosphere, and to your astonishment you can see scores, perhaps even hundreds of miles, if you are high enough up. It's so clear and it's so transparent. And Lama Govinda has described this too very very beautifully and very very powerfully in his book, 'The Way of the White Clouds'.

So when everything is so clear, when everything is so transparent, so translucent, so sparkling, if you like; when as I said in the earlier lecture the sky is really blue. In this country we never see a blue sky. You may think that you see a blue sky but what you see is not really blue. It's a sort of muddy impure colour. It's sort of clouded over because you are looking up at the blue sky through a sort of mist, through a sort of fog, and you don't usually become aware of this because one is so accustomed to it that we just take it for granted that the sky is like that. But if you get up into the heights of Tibet, if you get above this sort of level of human created smog and dirt and dust, then you see that sky as it really appear, or perhaps I shouldn't say as it really appears but as it more nearly appears when you get to this altitude and you see how blue it really is. So the Tibetans see colours like this. They see a blue sky which is blue. When they look at the red

rocks, the red rocks are red! I remember Lama Govinda himself telling me with what a sort of shock of astonishment it was that when he opened his eyes in Tibet on a clear bright morning, he saw rocks all around him, mountains all around him, which were so red, so richly and brilliantly and powerfully and livingly red that he was just taken aback, he just couldn't believe his eyes. He thought it was some sort of hallucination. But Tibet is like that. When you look at the waters of a lake, they are a deep, a rich, a vivid turquoise. When you look at the thousands of miles of landscape it's a deep rich brown merging into a beautiful purple. So all around you you see wonderful colours, translucent and iridescent and very very very brilliant and sparkling colours.

So the Tibetans have a wonderfully developed colour sense, and the art of the Tibetans, the religious art of the Tibetans, especially the thangkas, especially the painted scrolls, they reflect this. The best of them, painted in the complete orthodox tradition, employ only organic and mineral pigments. If there are any artists present - I think there are quite a few today - this may be of some little interest to them that Tibetan thangka painters traditionally do not use any prepared colours. They get earth and they get vegetable products, and they get semi-precious stones and they grind them themselves according to traditional techniques, and they mix them with oil and so on and they use them in this way. They don't buy them ready made, though I'm afraid, I'm sorry to say that some who have come into contact with Western civilization, are beginning to do this now, but the old artists, the traditional ones, they still employ these natural colours. And this helps them to get these really brilliant and really jewel-like effects. Some of the thangkas which I've seen in and around Kalimpong, belonging to Tibetan friends, and in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and temples are really remarkable for this fact, the sheer brilliance, the dazzling brilliance, one may say, of the colouring. At the same time there is nothing loud, there's nothing, as it were, harsh, nothing that sort of shrieks at you. It's a brilliant, but it's a sort of soft, a gentle brilliance. It isn't anything which seems unnatural. One can accept it. It seems real.

And the fact that the thangkas, the painted scrolls, are so brilliantly and vividly coloured has its own connection with the purpose for which the thangka itself is intended as we shall see a little later on.

Now from what I've said already perhaps it has become clear that Tibetan Buddhist art is not very original in the modern sense, and it doesn't even try to be original. In fact the Tibetan artist would regard any striving for originality as a sort of aberration. Suppose for instance, one wanted to ask an artist to do a painting of a particular Buddha, a particular Buddha form. Before we being perhaps it's significant that you go to the painter and you ask him. The painter doesn't one day get the idea, well I want to do a Buddha picture, he just sits, he just waits in his studio, in his workshop until somebody comes along, and orders a painting. This is how the whole things begins. So someone comes along and perhaps orders a painting of a Buddha - let's say for the sake of example, he orders one of Amitabha, that is the red Buddha, the Buddha of infinite light. And I may say that I've done this myself in Kalimpong quite a number of times. Decided for one reason or another that I wanted a painting, a thangka, of a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva. So along one goes to the artist, and one goes and calls on him and visits him in his little studio or in the monastery where he stays and of course the custom is in Tibet you don't get down to business right away - this is regarded as very very impolite. If you were just to go and say 'well, hello I want a painting', he'd be deeply shocked. This is just not the way in which

things are done in Tibet. So first of all one calls and then there are sundry enquiries, mutual enquiries about one's health - not the state of the weather, in Tibet it's always one's health, the state of one's 'excellent body' as they say. They ask you 'how is your excellent body this morning?' and so on. And then of course tea has to be offered and this is Tibetan tea, that is to say not our kind of tea but the tea which is flavoured with salt and well mixed with butter, and which is by the way very very good indeed. And when a few cups of this have been offered and partaken of, and when one has chatted for an hour or maybe two hours about this and that, then, very very indirectly - this is also polite - one gets round to the subject of the painting. And one may quite happily spend the whole morning or the whole afternoon with the artist in this way. He's not in a hurry. Usually when you go along he's painting something for some patron - he's fulfilling some order, but as soon as another patron comes he just puts down his brush and he welcomes the new person.

So when you've broached the subject eventually that you haven't come just to enquire about his health or to discuss local politics, but you want a painting in fact, the first things to be settled is how big. A rather prosaic question but it is certainly a very practical one. You say well one so big, or I want one so big, and that first of all is settled. And usually the second question is whether you want gold to be used or not, because the Tibetans in their paintings, in their thangkas, use a lot of real gold, and, if you have that it's important to specify that you want it, because that's charged separately. So when all this has been gone into - you say I want such and such size, I want such and such deity, and I want gold or I don't want gold, then what does the artist do? If it's a well-known form, a well known figure, well he knows everything off by heart, but if not, if it's a rather obscure Buddha or a comparatively unknown Bodhisattva, my experience is that he usually goes to a little bureau and he opens a drawer and he just sort of rummages among some papers and you find that there are all sorts of prints of different figures - different Buddhas, different Bodhisattvas, dakinis, dharmapalas, dakas and so on - there's a great stack of patterns as it were. So eventually he pulls out one and there you see it printed in black and white and he says, 'Is this the one you want?' And you say, well yes, that's the particular buddha that I want. So he says all right. And you know that when you've gone what he will do when he starts painting is that he will transfer that outline onto the centre of the silk on which he is going to paint the picture.

In other words, the painting is executed according to an existing traditional iconography. He executes the painting according to that. He doesn't depict the Buddha, the Amitabha or whoever else it may be, according to his own idea, according to his own thought. He depicts it strictly according to tradition. That it is of such and such proportion, such and such colour, so many arms, so many eyes, so many hands, the legs arranged in such and such way with such and such implements - all this is determined by tradition. There is some scope for originality, but it's very very limited. Originality is confined to the treatment of the landscape, that is to say the sky, the mountains, then the bushes and the flowers and the trees, and things of this sort; the offerings, and sometimes a very great deal of originality does go into these things, especially when it comes to clouds which are done very very beautifully, more or less in the Chinese style or Chinese tradition, but with a sort of effect of movement and motion and iridescence which cannot surely be very easy to capture. Now the good better artists, of course, the comparatively good artists will produce, working within the same tradition, a better, a finer work of art, but even he, even the really good artist continues to work within the tradition and he'll never try to

paint the Buddha as he thinks the Buddha looked or ought to look.

Now this brings us to a very important point. Perhaps this is the main thing to be understood in connection with Tibetan Buddhist art. We speak of Tibetan **Buddhist** art, but strictly speaking this is a tautology. It isn't really necessary to say Tibetan **Buddhist** art, because in fact Tibetan art is entirely Buddhist or entirely religious. In Tibet there is no secular art at all, or at least not any secular art really worth mentioning. And this, we may say, this fact, is in accordance with the general scheme or the general pattern of Tibetan life, at least traditional Tibetan life now unfortunately disrupted. The whole scheme, the whole pattern of Tibetan life is based on certain traditional values. That is to say it's based on spiritual values which have been handed down through a succession of teachers and disciples down the ages. And all aspects of life, all aspects of Tibetan life, are related in one way or another directly or indirectly to these values. And all aspects of Tibetan life therefore, inasmuch as they're related to these values, provide men of access to these values themselves. And this applies to all aspects of traditional Tibetan life. It applies to the economic organization, it applies to the government and administration, it applies even to social customs and manners. As we saw right at the very beginning of the series, the beginning of the first lecture, in Tibetan life - I was going to say in Tibetan **Buddhist** life but that isn't really necessary, this idea of precedence occupies a very important place. Because it reflects on the mundane level, the social level, the spiritual idea or ideal of hierarchy.

So inasmuch as all these aspects of life are closely interwoven with certain spiritual ideals, it isn't surprising that art itself, Tibetan art, is closely integrated with religion. And this applies, we may say to all the arts. It applies for instance to poetry.

I think the Tibetans have got only one little collection of secular poetry, and this is a collection of love poems or love songs attributed to the Sixth Dalai Lama, of all people. But apart from these, Tibetan poetry is entirely religious. It's the same with painting; there's no secular painting. Sometimes the religious art does depict aspects of incidents of secular life, but only as little details, as when they come in the Wheel of Life for instance. Music is entirely religious apart from a little folk music. And the drama is religious, the dance is religious, again apart from a little folk dancing. Architecture is religious, sculpture; these things are all religious. And even, one may say, many of the applied arts such as woodcarving, metalwork; these too are basically religious.

So the purpose of all these different forms, all these different expressions of art is not to give expression to the content of the artist's own individual mind. The purpose of all the artistic manifestations - whether in the form of music or poetry or art, painting, sculpture, architecture - the purpose of them all is to put the individual Buddhist, the individual member of the tradition, in touch with what the Tibetan tradition itself calls the 'One Mind', the Absolute Mind, the Absolute or Supreme Consciousness, the Dharmakaya, or Reality as it's also called. Or at least, if that is not possible, at least with a higher and wider and more comprehensive level of being and of consciousness. And Tibetan Buddhist art or Tibetan art does this with the help of what we call 'symbols'.

Now a symbol is defined as 'that which by custom or by convention represents something else'. It has a meaning beyond itself. It represents something beyond itself, something other than itself.

And it's in this sense that we speak, for instance of mathematical symbols when the letter x represents the unknown quantity. But a mathematical symbol is not a true symbol. If we want a definition of a true symbol we shall have to say that a true symbol is an object or a phenomenon in a lower order of existence which stands for, which represents, or which takes the place of, a corresponding object in a higher order of existence. And this conception, this definition of what a symbol is is based, of course, on the conception of a hierarchically ordered or hierarchically structured system of reality. For instance, in some traditions the sun, the physical sun, is regarded as a symbol of God, or, as in Plato's thought, as a symbol of the form of the Good. This is because the sun occupies in the physical universe a position analogous to that of what we call 'God' in the spiritual plane. Just as the sun gives light and heat and warmth, and therefore life to the whole of the planetary system, in the same way the spiritual sun or whatever you may like to call that - the spiritual sun gives light, as it were spiritual light, spiritual heat, spiritual warmth, spiritual life, to all the beings of the spiritual world. So just as the sun on the physical plane performs the same work, the same service, the same function as God or the Dharmakaya and so on on the spiritual plane, for that reason we say that the sun is a symbol of God. Not that it's just a sign, not that it's **just** a symbol, but that the sun on the physical plane, the physical level, the level of the material universe corresponds to that higher reality which we call God on the spiritual level, the higher level. In other words it's the same reality, it's the same thing. If you look at it in terms of the material universe, it's the sun, the material sun. If you look at it in terms of the spiritual universe, well then it's the spiritual sun - in other words, God. So it's the same thing, the same reality basically looked at from two different points of view, seen within two different contexts. So it isn't that the sun is just a sign of God but the sun is a symbol of God indirect correspondence with it. This is just an example as it were.

Now the symbols of Tibetan Buddhist art, they are of this order. They are symbols by virtue of their place in a system of correspondences, based upon a hierarchy of spiritual values in the universe as a whole. Now the symbols of Tibetan Buddhist art, we may say, are things which though material themselves, remind us of the existence of a higher order of life, and which in a sense even put us in touch with, enable us to communicate with, experience, that higher order. Now broadly speaking, Tibetan Buddhist art can be divided into four principal categories. First of all there is architecture, secondly there are paintings and iconography; thirdly ritual objects, and fourthly there are the decorative arts. And I'm going to describe now just a few of the symbols found in each of these categories.

Now first of all architecture. Here we come upon one of the most

Another architectural feature of the Tibetan landscape is one of the most important and most ubiquitous of all Buddhist symbols and that is the stupa. The stupa was originally a sort of funeral mound, a great heap of earth and the stupa is called in Tibet the chorten. Originally the stupa, the heap of earth, the mound and so on, the monument, enshrined the ashes of some great teacher or hero, enshrined the ashes of a Buddha or an arhant or a universal king and so on, and the stupa is very very prominent in Indian Buddhism, in Indian Buddhist art and architecture; but when Buddhism went to Tibet, the Tibetans adapted the stupa in their own way, just as Buddhists of other countries also did. So we find today that in Tibet there are many different kinds of stupa or chorten, but the basic structure is quite simple.

END OF CASSETTE SIDE ONE SIDE TWO

The stupa essentially is made up of geometrical forms - if you like geometrical symbols - which symbolize the five elements: that is to say, earth, water, fire, air, and space or ether (akasha). Now the earth, the element of earth is symbolized by the cube. The cube is very stable figure. You can't easily push it over, so earth also represents stability. So therefore we find that the element of earth, the grossest of all the elements, the heaviest of all elements is represented by the cube. So the cube is the first element in the stupa. If you want to make a stupa, build a stupa you start by laying down a cube, a cube base.

So on top of that cube base one places a sphere - or, later on it became a hemisphere but really it's a sphere - and the sphere symbolizes water. The sphere is the least stable figure because you can push it very easily: just a touch and it will move. So in this way it's a very appropriate symbol for water, because water always moves, it always flows, it isn't stable. It's the reverse of stable; it's the opposite of earth. So just as earth is represented by the cube, so water, the element which is grossest of all except for earth itself, is represented by the sphere. So this is how you begin to build your stupa up. First of all a cube. On top of the cube a sphere or a hemisphere.

On top of the sphere or the hemisphere comes a cone. The cone represents fire, and fire is represented by a cone because the cone is almost the shape of a flame. The cone points upwards just as the flame points upwards as it burns. So now you've got three symbols, symbolizing three elements. First of all the cube, then the sphere or hemisphere, and then on top of that the cone. So the stupa begins to take shape, to take form.

Then fourthly, balanced on the point of the cone there is a crescent. If you see it two dimensionally it looks a crescent but if you see it three dimensionally it's a sort of bowl or saucer, and this symbolizes air, and is the inverted bowl of the sky or firmament. So this is the picture so far. The cube, the sphere, the cone and then on top of the point of the cone, the inverted bowl, the crescent, representing air.

And then in that inverted bowl, in that saucer or cup if you like, an accumulated flame, and this accumulated flame, that is to say a flame tapering into a point, this represents the fifth element or symbolizes the fifth element, that is to say space or ether. And you notice it tapers into a point, and this point, this position without magnitude, this represents the so-called sixth element, in addition to the ordinary five; that is to say consciousness. And it's represented as a point because a point has no dimensions, because consciousness itself, unlike earth, water, fire, and air, has no dimensions. Consciousness is that which contains them all without itself being contained by any thing. So the consciousness, the sixth element is represented by that point, which means or indicates a sort of transition to another dimension, as I mentioned, of mind or consciousness, from the physical, from the material.

Now the question may arise well why is the stupa, why is the chorten, this particular architectural form, this particular kind of monument, why is it built up from symbols representing the five elements? Why should your chorten, your memorial, your funeral monument if you like, be represented by symbols of earth and water and fire and air? And there's a reason for this. After all it's a funeral monument; it's a monument over the ashes of a somebody dead person or it's a monument in memory of someone. So the idea is here that the

stupa is made up of these symbols of the elements because at the time of death the physical body, in fact the whole psycho-physical being, is resolved back into the elements from which it came. According to Buddhist tradition, the solid parts of the body, they revert to earth. The watery parts of the body, the fluid parts, the liquid parts - the blood and the rest - they revert to water. Then the heat, the vital heat in the body, this returns to fire. It is absorbed into the total heat and warmth of the universe. And then the air which fills our nostrils, which fills our lungs, is just exhaled into the atmosphere, and the space that we occupy, well when our physical body ceases to exist, this little space, as it is called, occupied by our physical bodies merges in the great space. And in the same way, our mind also, when the bonds of the ego are dissolved - which is a sort of spiritual death - merges into absolute mind or absolute consciousness at that point, as it were at the top of the accumulated flame. This whole arrangement, by the way, of the symbols of the elements in the stupa, and its whole symbolism is very closely connected with a particular kind, a particular type of meditation, called the Six Element Meditation, but we've no time to go into all that now.

Another architectural symbol is that of the three-storeyed temple. Many Tibetan temples are built with three storeys, and the three storeys represent the three levels of Reality. Reality can be divided in many ways, it can be stratified in many ways, but one of the most ancient and popular is a threefold one. So this threefold division or stratification of Reality is reflected in the three storeys of the temple. And these three levels we may call the mundane level, the archetypal level, and the absolute level. And one finds on each storey, at each level an image, a figure, of the Buddha enshrined, and these three figures, these three images on these three different levels - the ground floor, the first floor and the second floor - these represent the three kayas of the Buddha, or the three Kayas of the Enlightened being. Kaya literally means 'body', but it's more like an aspect, more like an aspect of personality. And these three are the nirmanakaya, the created body; the sambhogakaya, the body of mutual enjoyment or glorious body; and the dharmakaya, the body of Reality. So these three kayas or bodies or aspects represent the Buddha-nature itself as perceived at different levels of Reality. When one perceives the Buddha-nature, the Buddha-being if you like, on the level of the mundane historical reality, then one sees the historical Buddha. If one goes higher, if one goes to the archetypal level, then one sees the same reality more nearly, more truly, as the sambhogakaya Buddha, a sort of archetypal form. If one goes higher still, then one sees the inner essence of those Buddha-bodies; one sees the dharmakaya, or Reality itself, without any form.

Now one finds, as I've said, at these three different storeys, on these three different levels, images of the Buddha representing these three kayas. For instance, if one enters the temple, one enters usually from the ground floor, one finds enshrined in the ground floor temple an image of Sakyamuni. Sakyamuni, that is to say the human historical Buddha: Gautama the Buddha, the Indian prince who lived 500BC and became Enlightened under the bodhi tree at the age of thirty-five etc., etc. It's his image, Sakyamuni's image, Gautama the Buddha's image that you find enshrined on the ground floor. And there he is, wearing his monk's robes, with dark blue curls, with his begging-bowl, and so on; and the walls of the temple, that ground-floor temple are covered with frescoes, and there you see depicted incidents and scenes from the life of the historical Buddha. You see him sitting under the bodhi tree, fighting with Mara, the Evil One; preaching his first sermon; you see him passing away and so on. You also see very often stories from the Jatakas, the legends of his previous lives, his previous existences on the historical - or

at least on the material - plane. So the ground floor represents, as it were, the historical plane. Here we are concerned with the nirmanakaya. But when you climb up to the first floor we find it rather different. We're in a different world, we're on a higher level, a higher plane, and here we find enthroned an sort of dhyani Buddha, a meditation Buddha, an archetypal Buddha if you like. And he doesn't wear the ordinary monastic robes; he wears princely garments flowing, flowered silks. He wears ornaments jewellery, gold and silver and so on. It's a quite different sort of figure; it's something resplendent, something archetypal, something glorified. And on the walls one doesn't see anything historical, anything human. You find mandalas. You find circles containing the figures of the five Buddhas perhaps, the five Buddhas being the five principal archetypal Buddha forms. So here on this first storey you find yourself in the archetypal world, on the archetypal plane, above and beyond the human and the historical.

And then you climb up a bit further, you climb up to the second, the top storey, and what do you find here? Here you find what is called the Adibuddha, the primeval Buddha, the Buddha from the beginning; if you like the Absolute Buddha, and how is he represented? He's not represented wearing monastic robes; he's not represented wearing even princely garments. He is represented without any clothes at all, completely naked, either blue, or black, or white, or dark brown; but in any case without any clothes at all, because here all veils, all vestures, have been removed. This is the level as it were of Reality itself. And very often you find this Adibuddha, this primordial Buddha, this Absolute Buddha figure represented in the yab-yum position, that is to say the male and the female Buddha, or the male Buddha with his female counterpoint in intimate sexual union, representing the fusion, as it were in the Enlightened mind of the Wisdom element, represented by the female, and the Compassion element, represented by the male. And these one finds only at the top level, the highest storey of all. These particular figures, these yab-yum figures therefore in Tibetan Buddhism are regarded as pertaining not to any lower, any mundane level, but to the highest and the most spiritual level of all, to the absolute, the level of full Reality. And then what does one find on the walls? Well, ideally, according to the best traditions, on the walls you find nothing. The walls are completely bare: there's no representations, no form, no figure, not a leaf, not a flower, just bare, and in the middle the naked Buddha figure yab and yum. So here one is concerned with, obviously, the level of absolute Reality.

And in this way the architecture of the temple itself, with all its images, all its paintings, with all its decorations, with all its symbolism, represents or symbolizes concretely these different levels of Reality up through which one must ascend, to the truth. The material, the physical, the human historical at the bottom; then the archetypal, the ideal, the celestial, and then above all the Ultimate, the Real, the Absolute.

Now for just a few symbols found in painting and in iconography. These of course are extremely numerous and we've time this evening only for two or three examples. Now I've already referred to the thangkas or painted scrolls. I've already mentioned how vivid and how brilliant their colours are, and these, these painted scrolls, are not just for beautiful decoration, they're not just to hang in your shrine to decorate it - these are aids to visualization - and as I've indicated they're painted in accordance with tradition, and the tradition derives ultimately from somebody's meditation; long ago usually or sometimes not so long ago a great saint, a great meditator, a great mystic, a great yogi, in his meditation saw this sort of divine vision dawn, and

he described it to his disciples. He might have written about it. He might even, if he was an artist himself, have tried to paint or to draw it. And then anybody else who wants to meditate upon that form or figure, that aspect of Reality, does so by means of a drawing or a painting deriving from that tradition which goes back to the original experience. I shall be speaking at great length about the actual process of visualization in meditation in the lecture on 'Tibetan Buddhist Meditation' itself the week after next, and also a little next time, that is to say next week, when dealing with the subject of 'The Four Foundation Yogas of the Tibetan Tantra'.

I've already said that the thangkas are painted in bright, in jewel-like colours. So let me say a few words about the symbolism in Tibetan Buddhist art of colours themselves. The colour is very often a very important key to the significance of the visualized forms, the forms visualized in meditation, forms of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and so on. If you know what colour the form is, what colour the Buddha is, the Bodhisattva is, then you have a rough and ready idea of its general spiritual significance. For the purposes of Tibetan Buddhist iconography there are five colours. First of all there's red, a very deep, brilliant, rich vivid red. And red, in the Tibetan Buddhist, especially Tantric tradition, is the colour of love and compassion. We tend to think of red in the West as the colour of anger but not in Tibet. In Tibet they think of this red - I can't see any red like it around me, perhaps these candles come near it - but it's very very deep; at the same time very bright, very rich and very vivid, very brilliant. And this represents love and compassion. If you see a red deity, a red Buddha or a red Bodhisattva, or a red dakini, then you can be sure that they represent the Buddha-nature or the Buddha mind or the Enlightened being under the aspect of love or compassion. So this is red.

Then green. Green represents usually of peace, pacification and salvation from dangers. Psychologists tell us nowadays that green is a very pacifying colour. If you are rather nervy, if you are rather anxious, if you worry a lot, if you are tense, then you are advised to decorate your room, if you can, if you are allowed to if the landlady permits, with green, and this will have a pacifying effect. So one finds therefore in the Tibetan tradition also, green is the colour of peace and pacification and calm and tranquility and salvation from fears and dangers of every kind.

Then there's yellow - brilliant, rich, vivid yellow - this is the colour of growth, of prosperity or riches, even worldly riches, of beauty and of maturation. Yellow is the colour of sunlight of course, and it's the light of the sun and the warmth of the sun which brings everything material to a perfection, to a state of maturity. So this is what yellow represents in the Tibetan iconographical tradition.

Then there's light and dark blue, a sort of Oxford and Cambridge blue if you like, and these both represent knowledge, knowledge of the absolute, knowledge of the truth, knowledge of the undifferentiated Absolute, knowledge of sunyata in Buddhist terminology. This is the colour of the unclouded sky, blue..

And then added to these, there's also find black and white. White represents purity, as in all traditions apparently. It represents also primordial being, being from the beginning, being as transcending time or the absolute Reality as transcendent over time. And then Black, and also very dark blue, these have the same significance. They represent, they symbolize death and destruction, but this is something positive. Black and dark blue or very dark blue represent

Enlightenment in its negative aspect as annihilation of ignorance. If you see a dark blue figure or a black figure, usually with a wrathful expression, this represents Enlightenment itself, the Buddha or Bodhisattva himself under the aspect of destruction of spiritual ignorance.

So from this we can see, from this we can say that, you can tell the general nature of a deity in Tibetan Buddhist art, whether Buddha or Bodhisattva, representing this or that aspect of Enlightenment, from the colour. If the deity is connected with peace, well you'll know that because it's green. If it's connected with love you'll know that because it's red. If it's connected with purification you'll know that because it's white - sometimes very pale blue - and so on. For instance you've got the Green Tara, the green goddess of mercy Western writers usually call her, but it's not quite that. It's a sort of Buddha form, a female Buddha form, because in the Tantra we have female Buddhas as well as male Buddhas. The Tantra doesn't differentiate in this way. So the Green Tara is that form of Tara which is concerned with peace, pacification, salvation from dangers and so on. In the same way there's the red Kurukulle, a rather extraordinary sort of female Buddha figure, bright red in colour. And being bright red she represents the love aspect, the passion aspect if you like, of the Enlightened mind.

Incidentally I should observe that these black or dark blue or even brown figures are often referred to by Western writers as demons or as devils or as fiends. And Waddell, that early writer on Tibetan Buddhism - very well informed though not with very much understanding - is very fond of this sort of nomenclature. He refers, for instance, to the 'Buddha fiendesses' and the 'Buddha demonesses', and he this gives quite the wrong sort of impression. These are not demons or fiends or anything like that. These are the highest level of all, the Buddha level, but seen under their aspect of the destruction of ignorance, the destruction of the darkness of spiritual ignorance. Sometimes they are very very fierce indeed. Sometimes they've got thick, stout, strong bodies, dark blue or black or dark brown, and they wear garlands of skulls and elephant hides and tiger skins, and have long teeth or tusks and two or three or four or five eyes. They are very very fierce, very wrathful, they trample upon enemies, and there's a halo, a sort of aureole of flames surging all round them, and they look very very frightful; and they're meant to look, but they're not demons, they're not devils, they're not anything to do with hell in the Western sense. They are aspects of Enlightenment, and they are those aspects of Enlightenment which burn up, which destroy, which overcome, ignorance in all its manifold forms.

The Tibetan Buddhist idea is that ignorance is so strong, ignorance is so powerful, that these beautiful peaceful figures, they don't stand a chance, so they have to assume these terrible, wrathful forms in order to make some impression, at least, on the forces of ignorance. Otherwise they just don't take any notice. There are many legends, there are many stories to this effect; how this or that Buddha or this or that Bodhisattva in meditation just closed his eyes, and out of the forehead emerged a great beam of light, and the end of that beam of light a terrific and monstrous terrifying wrathful figure brandishing a club and shouting 'I want your blood' and things of this sort. Well this is the only way in which the Enlightened mind, apparently, can operate in this wicked world. And when one confronts the world, when one surveys the world sometimes, one feels every sympathy with this sort of approach. That it isn't the peaceful and the meek and the mild Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are going to get anything done, but perhaps the more wrathful and the more terrifying ones.

But of course, one must remember, one must never forget, it isn't ordinary anger, it isn't ordinary wrath. It's what the Tantric tradition calls 'the Great Anger' and 'the Great Wrath'. And Great, 'Maha', here means 'purified by sunyata', because he's gone through the fires of the Absolute and come out at the other end. In other words it isn't an anger or wrath based upon ignorance or based upon the ego; it's just the opposite of that, it's pure compassion really, it's pure love really, but when ignorance and when hatred encounters that love, it can experience it only as wrath or only as anger, and this is the root, this is the basis if you like, of this sort of symbolism in Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the Tibetan Buddhist Tantra.

Now one or two examples of symbols from painting and iconography. There is for instance the eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokitesvara. Avalokitesvara is generally speaking the Bodhisattva of Compassion. And this form in particular with eleven heads - to our way of thinking a very grotesque idea - and a thousands arms represents absolute compassion. Compassion operating simultaneously in all directions, in all possible ways. The thousand arms represent the innumerable expedients of compassion, to help and to save living beings, and it's significant that each arm terminates in a hand in which there is an eye, which means that even in the remotest operations of compassion there is awareness, there is wisdom. There's a little saying that I'm fond of quoting to the effect that 'it takes all the wisdom of the wise to undo the harm done by the merely good'. So the activity of compassion is not a sort of goody-goodying kind of activity divorced from awareness, divorced from wisdom. The compassion is there. That's represented by the thousand outstretched arms and hands; but the wisdom, the awareness is also there in the midst represented by the eye in the palm of the hand. Now the eleven heads are by the way the eleven directions: north, south, east, and west, the intermediate points, the zenith, the nadir, and the middle.

Then there's the Green Tara. One of the most beautiful figures in Tibetan Buddhism, and the colour green, as I've said represents peace, represents salvation from dangers. And you find that the left hand holds a lotus and that the lotus has three blossoms, three lotus blossoms - blue. One is quite open, one is half open, and one is just a bud, and these three represent the Buddhas of the three periods of time. It's as though Tara, the Green Tara manifests herself as the Buddhas of the three periods of time. The Buddha of the past is fully opened - he's gone, as it were, he has reached perfection. The Buddha of the present half open, because his dispensation, his teaching, is still in force, still survives; and then the bud represents the Buddha of the future, who has not yet come. So these three blossoms - open, half-open and just budding - represent the Buddhas of the three times. And then Tara wears, the Green Tara wears, a tiara of five skulls or sometimes five jewels, representing the five wisdoms. No time to go into all that And again she has two feet - it might sound a little odd to say she has two feet - you say 'well why not?' Well not in Tibetan Buddhism - sometimes there are ten feet, or sometimes there are sixteen, or sometimes there are twenty-four, so we specify two feet. One is in the lotus posture like this , and that means that she is always in meditation, but the other is just hanging down. She's ready to step out into the world. So one represents immersion within in the absolute, in meditation. The other represents engagement without in the world through compassion.

Now these are just some, just a few of the symbols of Tibetan Buddhist art, and you can perhaps imagine for yourself the effect on the minds of people who are in touch with them all the time, that these symbols will have. We suffer from a dearth of symbols, we don't have any symbols.

The nearest we get usually is a sort of Christmas tree maybe at Christmas time, or something of that sort, but no real symbols; but the Tibetan Buddhist is surrounded, or was surrounded, by symbols. The Tibetan aspirant is saturated in symbols, and in symbolism. Wherever you look you see a stupa, or a three-storeyed temple, or someone twirling a prayer wheel or telling their beads, or you see a thangka. Even your social customs, your etiquette - the way in which you eat and drink and receive friends and visitors - this all has a symbolical value; it all which helps to put you in touch with that which is beyond the symbols, but to which the symbols point - these higher levels of being and consciousness and reality.

Not all Tibetans understand the meanings of their symbols, but at least they've got a sort of sense, even if they don't intellectually understand them, a sort of sense, of something greater, wider, higher, nobler, more spiritual, lying above and beyond and, at the same time, interpenetrating them all. So therefore we can see that the symbols of Tibetan Buddhist art - in fact Tibetan Buddhist art itself or Tibetan art itself - is a very important, a vital aspect of Tibetan Buddhism generally. And perhaps we can say, perhaps we can say in conclusion, that our own lives would be a little richer, certainly a little more interesting, if they could incorporate more symbolism of a spiritual nature. If that could be brought about, if that could happen then perhaps we would be not quite so much estranged and alienated and sundered from reality as at present we usually are.