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ETHICS IN AESTHETICS: ECO-SPIRITUAL AND ELEMENTAL SYMBOLISM IN THANGKA PAINTINGS

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Abstract

The ancient civilizations of the world show how the primitive man lived in harmony with the nature and respected its elements. Painting, sculpture, architectural adornment, and the ornate art forms draw inspiration from nature and consequently impersonate love, admiration, and ethics of conservation. Eco-spirituality emerges from a realization of cosmic world and gaining the popularity owing to a need for reconsidering man's bond with nature, which has enfeebled due to growing environmental crisis, climate change, global warming that need to be handled. Buddhism, one of the ancient religions of the world, laid emphasis not only for valuing the living beings but also for their living spaces. Thangka are used to instil aspects of Buddhism among the learners and monks, describe the historical events, illustrate myths linked with the deities, and depict the useful ethno-biological aspects of medicinal plants and animals. Eco-spiritual elements remained the theme of Thangka paintings and are extensively used in these to instil the thought of conservation of ecology. A number of trees, creepers, shrubs, herbs are painted in Thangka paintings. In addition to this, the Thangka paintings depict a number of animals like, horses, deer, elephants, lions, tigers, peacock, etc. Relational values convey the connection between an individual and ecological attributes and this can help in recognizing the gaps and realizing the faults on the part of human civilization. The understanding of deep cognitive values hidden in the artwork, when appreciated and valued can provide an inclusive answer for negotiating suitable outcomes. This paper examines the eco-spiritual and elemental symbolism in Thangka paintings.

Keywords: ecospirituality; Thangka Paintings; Tibetian Buddhism; environmental ethics; Green Buddhism; symbolism; floral elements; faunal elements; planetary elements; landscapes.

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...We all cherish tranquillity. For example, when spring comes, the days grow longer, there is more sunshine, the grass and trees come alive and everything is fresh. People feel happy. In autumn, one leaf falls, then another, then all the beautiful flowers die until we are surrounded by bare-naked plants. We do not feel so joyful. Why is this? Because deep down, we desire constructive, fruitful growth and dislike things collapsing, dying or being destroyed. Every destructive action goes against our basic nature; building, being constructive, is the human way…

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1992.

Introduction

From the times of yore, man has lived in harmony with the nature, and this is the vital component of every culture, which is divulged in diverse conventional beliefs and practices. At the same time, its conservation is not a new thought, but was an intrinsic feature of psyche and conviction, which permeates each aspect of life. The protection of nature and its elements is reflected in the daily lives of human society, valued in myths, folklore, arts, and ethos. The vital principles of ecology – the inter-relationship and inter-dependence of life – were theorized in the ethos and revealed in the ancient scriptures. Every nation across the globe has deep-rooted traditions linked with the conservation. The ancient visual reflection of man's love and respect for nature can be seen in thousand years old cave paintings at Bhimbetka in the Central India portraying human beings living in harmony with birds and animals. The excavations of the Indus Valley Civilization substantiate man's concern for wildlife, which can be seen in the seals exemplifying the symbols of animals. Furthermore, every religious conviction of the world laid stress on the values, beliefs, and attitudes that spread cross-cultural reverence for nature and its elements. The art and literary works value nature and appreciate the ecological balance. Diverse images of nature's five elements, forests, plants, animals, landscapes, water bodies, and sky are depicted in the paintings, sculpture, engravings, and other art works.

With the passage of time, the age-old cultural ethos and traditions, which formed the basis of ecological conservation faded into oblivion; and after a mad race for the development, which disturbed the ecological balance, man again thought of going for sustainable development and organized Stockholm Conference and Earth Summit. Though, these conventions have become the need of the hour, still the fact is that the man has to peep into the past for synchronizing the ancient ecological principles with the contemporary thought to find out means for managing the environmental problems. His Holiness the Dalai Lama during the Rio Earth Summit in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil on June 1, 1992 said:

"…I believe that to meet the challenge of our times, human beings will have to develop a greater sense of universal responsibility. Each of us must learn to work not for his or her self, family or nation, but for the benefit of all mankind. Universal responsibility is the real key to human survival. It is the best foundation for world. Peace, the equitable use of natural resources and through concern for the future generations, the proper care of the environment…".

Eco-spirituality, an expression of spiritual link between man and environment, unites ecology and spirituality and establishes an interface between religion and ecological activism (World Bank, 2006). The contemporary environmental crisis has prompted man to draw

lessons from the past and look into the ecological implications of art and aesthetics, away from the materialistic world (Lincoln, 2000, Schalkwyk, 2011, Bonfiglio, 2012).

According to the Buddhist belief, in rebirth, man can be reincarnated in the form of animal, plant or even the non-living entity. Hence, the Buddhist beliefs taught not to pollute, kill, or harm any of the elements of life, but to judiciously use the natural resources so that these can be conserved for the generations to come. Even the contemporary thought, underlines the interdependence of biotic and abiotic components of ecosystem and emphasize on equal respect for the two. The modern concept of sustainable development stresses on the same thought as underlined in the primitive one. Buddhism stresses the link and interdependence of nature's elements – both in the visible and the invisible realms. Buddhist philosophy explains the organic and nonorganic world and the link between the two. According to the Buddhist perspective, the ecological issues in the organic world are due to the pollution of the inner-self or the non-organic world. Man's greed is endless and the environment we live in has its limitations and carrying capacity, and the Buddhist thought try to regulate the same. Another instance can be of Mongolian Buddhism, which just like Tibet merged the indigenous traditions of valuing environment by recognizing mountains, rivers, or landscapes as sacred, and managing these by preventing the hunting. The myths, prayers, and narratives of Mongolia still talk about man's relationship with nature. All elements of nature are seen as a part of a collective entity, where the blue sky is regarded as the father and the earth as the mother. It was believed that each element of nature has a spirit master, and in order to co-exist amicably, some offerings were made and the rules were to be followed, for instance, avoid digging the earth, polluting rivers, cutting trees, destroying the roots of grasses, disturbing habitats of the animals or hunting without reason. It was thought that violation of the rules could bring about calamity to the violator, his clan, and society. Many such practices had been the part of Buddhist traditions, where the nature's spirits are linked with nagas or serpents. While Buddhism in Mongolia codified erstwhile environmentally sound traditions, it also evolved its own customs. As a matter of fact, the monks are trained to love and safeguard flora and fauna and use the environment selflessly. The mountains, rivers, and forests are considered sacred – either for the reason that these are the dwelling place of a deity or that these are regarded as the benign form of deity. Such taboos have helped in safeguarding the sacred and eco-cultural landscapes. Some sacred landscapes are believed to house the spirit masters – who are thought to assume the shape of mountain, for instance the bird-shaped Bogd Khaan Mountain to the south of Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, has shape similar to that of a *garud*, the mythical bird (Monkhsaikhan, 2000 and Sukhbaatar, 2000). Likewise, the animals are considered sacred for their association with the eco-cultural landscapes, for example, snakes and fish are believed to be the animals of the *nagas*, or the nature spirits. Hence, their hunting was considered as an evil. These beliefs have not only helped in imbibing the thought of conservation, but have offered protection to the rich floral and faunal diversity of region.

Kellert (2000) categorize ten values that indicate man's relationship with the natural world; these are: aesthetic, dominionistic, ecologistic-scientific, humanistic, moralistic, naturalistic, negativistic, spiritual, symbolic, and utilitarian. Of these, aesthetics is an admiration of the physical attraction and beauty of nature, while moralistic is ethical concern for nature and naturalistic is pleasure of being captivated by nature. The spiritual is the feelings of divine existence and respect for nature and symbolic means drawing philological and meditative

motivation from nature. In its appreciation of several interdependencies between man's welfare and ecological condition and function, Kellert's categorization is mainly useful for understanding connection in socio-ecological systems. Kellert's typology holds that man's ethics in relation to the environment are initiated in human biological requirements and are designed and intervened by individual and cultural learning and experience. By valuing each assigned ethic, it would be useful to determine why that species or ecosystem is considered vital to an individual, or group, and to recognize the apprehended or relational values linked with it. This can be achieved by appreciating the values hidden in the aesthetics and acquiring knowledge from the same (Jones et al. 2016).

The conservation principles not only find mention in the ancient religious texts but became the subjects of religious artworks. Even today, the proponents of every religion talk about the principles of ecological conservation and their artworks have the reflections of these philosophies (Palmer and Finlay, 2000). Though Buddhism was founded in the ancient India between the 6th and 4th Century BC, but even today, most Buddhist scholars, while looking at growing environmental crisis has developed '*Green Buddhism*'. Gary Snyder, one of the pioneers of '*Green Buddhism*' made an effort to interweave Buddhist practice and ecological thinking. Though, '*Green Buddhism*' has not talked about air and water pollution, it uses sacredness to focus deeply on finding solution to the contemporary environmental problems. The religious scriptures, religious artwork, murals, carvings, and scroll paintings have illustrations of nature's elements, which have both eco-spiritual connotations. A deep insight of these will not only help in establishing a link between the two, but in learning the lessons from the same. In order to realize the essence of eco-spirituality in general and '*Green Buddhism*' in particular, there is need of looking at the eco-spiritual and elemental symbolism hidden in the Thangka paintings (Schalkwyk, 2011).

Thangkas: The Process Involved

Thangka scroll painting, a traditional schematised form of Buddhist art, consisting of a painted panel enveloped by a textile mantle held by scroll sticks and covered with a silk cover, has religious and eco-spiritual implication. The mantle of Thangka scroll usually consists of silk brocade, and the image is generally accomplished in natural colours. In general, the Thangka portrays significant Buddhist motifs, elements of nature, the Wheel of Life, images of Lord Buddha, life of Buddha, Buddhist deities and mandalas. Thangka is intricate and comprehensive artwork, with images inter-woven in a systematized geometric series of overlying lattices, which take weeks or even months to complete. These paintings perform important role in the life of Buddhist monks and medicine practitioners. Thangka also acts as mediums through which the prayers are offered. Most significantly, the Thangka art is an invaluable meditation tool and is an indication of the divine that is inspiring both visually and spiritually.

Thangka art is traditionally believed to be a Nepalese innovation brought into the light to Tibet by Princess Bhrikuti of Nepal who got married to Songtsan Gampo, founder of the Tibetan empire, around 620–632 CE. She brought with her the images of Avalokitesvara and other deities. During the reign of Songtsan Gampo many monasteries were built across the entire Tibetan plateau. When the Buddhism expanded, the need was felt for the propagation of sacred symbols and manuscripts. Artisans and monks of Nepal started transferring metal sculptures and manuscripts to Tibet. At the same time, the artists from

Nepal were invited by the King to paint the murals in Tsuglagkhang temple of Lhasa. By the 9th – 10th Century, the artisans were able to carry the Thangkas from one monastery to other and they started creating the artwork on cloth. It was how, a new school of Thangka painting came into being. Since Thangkas could be easily rolled and transported, these paintings gradually became common among the monks of medieval Tibet who moved frequently in the rural communities and monasteries to give divine discourses. These paintings are still used for teaching and spiritual practices. In the 14th – 15th Century, the artists started using brighter colours in Thangka paintings. The Tibetan artisans got inspired by the Tantric cult which was reflected in the Thangkas with a variety of symbols, including the elements of nature (Beer, 2003). There are two categories of Thangka paintings, viz. *Palas*, the descriptive paintings of the deities and *Mandala*, the mystical images of complex text, spheres, and squares. Usually, the Thangka is 60 cm wide and 90 cm long but, those used for rituals and monasteries are painted on walls and are life-sized. The vibrancy of Thangka paintings lies in the fact that it gives importance to symbolism, accurate specification, bright colours and intricate illustrations. The complex illustrations, motifs, figures and bright colours of Thangka paintings have fascinated the art lovers across the globe. Not only the Thangkas depict the elements of nature, but also make use of natural colours, minerals, and pigments to impart vitality to the artwork. This paper attempts to examine the eco-spiritual elements of Thangka paintings (JackSon, and JackSon, 1998).

In distinguishing various masterpieces, Thangka uses the shrines, the palace, buildings, rocks, clouds, trees, or sharply contrasting colours to differentiate and link the elements. The Thangkas predominantly depict the figures of Buddhist pantheon, which are believed to be the embodiments of enlightenment and absolute. The contents of Thangka paintings range extensively, including religious activities and characters from Buddhism and story scenes and backgrounds of high plateaus and mountains. Usually, the shimmering greens are used for rocks, trees, sky, and the ground. Individuals, structures and Buddha are created with warm tones of yellow and red. The artists not only take care of the overall effect of depiction but also lay emphasis on the detailed illustration of each image, for example, within each mount, the natural objects, maybe rocks and plants and other characters are merged using the same colouring scheme with diverse shades giving a layering impression. Line drawing is the basic method of traditional Thangka, which use gold threading to outline the figures and landscape through variable line thickness (JackSon, and JackSon, 1998).

The colours used in the traditional Thangkas comprise of powdered minerals and plant pigments, which are mixed with a particular glue and water. Mineral based colours make use of powdered coal for black colour, Lapislazuli for dark blue, Azurite for light blue, powdered Pyrite for yellow, powdered Hematite for red, powdered Malachite for green and powdered Diatomite for white. The main plant pigments include Chlorophyll, Betalains, Carotenoids, and Flavonoids which are used for making green, blue, orange, red, yellow, and pink colours. The process of making natural pigment-based colours is highly complex and involves experience and traditional skills, which is passed on from one generation to another. Before getting the natural colours, a base or substrate is traditionally produced by using yak leather glue (JackSon, and JackSon, 1998).

The nature's elements, viz. air, is recognized as blue or black and depicted as semi-circular; fire, identified as red and portrayed as triangular; water, identified as white is represented as circular; earth, identified as yellow is shown as square. The Thangkas serve

the transcendent purpose for monks, who are contemplating for self-realization. Meditation on individual colours can bring about spiritual transformation. In *Pancha-Varna*, the five colours, each colour has its own spiritual and aesthetic significance, for instance, black signifies wrath; white denotes contemplation and it transforms the illusion of ignorance to the wisdom of realism; yellow symbolizes nourishment and changes pride to wisdom of consistency; red represents conquest and transforms the misconception of attachment to the wisdom of judgement; green symbolizes exorcism and transforms jealousy into the wisdom of completion; and blue transforms annoyance into mirror like wisdom.

Thangkas: The Eco-Spiritual Symbolism

Thangka, besides depicting the *Palas* and *Mandalas*, displays floral and faunal elements, mountains, clouds, landscapes, and nature's elements. Portrayal of dense floral and faunal elements in and around the painting is the remarkable features of Thangka paintings. Depiction of nature is often symbolic, which is the basis of Buddhist aesthetics. Symbols have been a part of ancient culture and are used as illustrations and indicators. Symbol is linked with a particular concept or a thought. Ecologists and botanists around the world are discussing the significant role of biodiversity in the ecosystems, but, there's a different aspect of biodiversity, i.e., their eco-cultural and aesthetic value.

Symbol, being the representation of a thought of tangible individuality is used for portraying nature's elements; for example, flora appears in almost all the paintings to enhance its beauty and aesthetics. Lotus, one of the primitive floral symbols of art, which signifies divine purity, is widely used in the Thangka and Buddhist art (Fig. 1). The roots of lotus are in filthy water, but its flower arises above the filth and bloom outside. In Thangka, a fully blossoming lotus denotes enlightenment, whereas its bud signifies a time before the attaining enlightenment. A partly open flower with hidden centre indicates the enlightenment beyond usual spectacle. The mud nurturing the roots of lotus epitomizes the cluttered human life, but despite this, it is amidst the materialistic world that one gets the chance to blossom. According to a Zen verse it is propounded, '*May we be in muddy water with chastity, like a lotus*'. Coming out of mud and flowering needs faith; hence, besides purity and enlightenment, a lotus also symbolizes faith. Lotus is one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism (Beer, 2003). According to a legend, before the birth of Buddha, his mother visualized a white elephant holding a white lotus in its trunk. In Thangka paintings, Buddha and *Bodhisattvas* (persons on the path towards Buddhahood) are frequently depicted as seated or standing on a lotus platform or holding a lotus flower as well. *Manjusri*, the *Bodhisattvas* of wisdom is often depicted in yellow colour, holding the sword of knowledge in right hand that can remove ignorance. In the left hand, he holds a stem of lotus flower on which prajnaparamita (perfection of wisdom), body of sutras and commentaries on oldest forms of Mahayana Buddhism is placed (Fig. 2). White Tara or Seven-eyed Tara, the most admired Goddess in Buddhist Mahayana tradition, believed to be created from the tear of Avalokitesvara is depicted. Both hands and feet have eyes besides two normal eyes and third eye on the forehead. White colour of her body symbolizes amity and serenity. She is depicted with a blue flower in her left hand, which is a symbol of peace (Fig. 3). The eyes in feet and hands symbolizes alertness for she is always conscious of non-harming others and the third eye symbolises the wisdom.

Fig. 1. Lotus. Attribute of Eight Auspicious symbol. Source: i.pinimg.com.

Fig. 2. Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom holds a stem of lotus flower on which prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom), body of sutras and their commentaries that represents the oldest of the major forms of Mahayana Buddhism is placed. Source: mandalas.life.

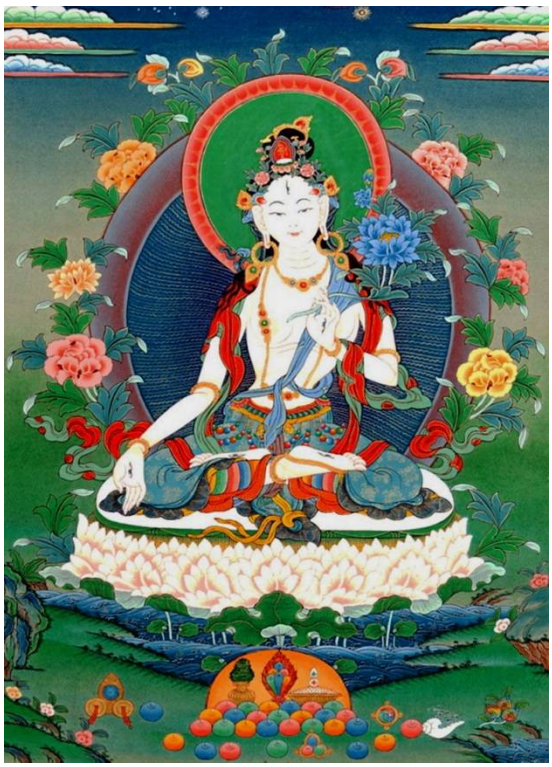

Fig. 3. White Tara or Seven-eyed Tara. Source: theyoginiproject.org.

In Buddhist iconography, even the colour of a lotus has a specific connotation, for instance, a blue lotus represents the accuracy in knowledge. Likewise, a golden lotus denotes the enlightenment of all Buddhas (Fig. 4), and a pink lotus denotes the Buddha and his succession (Fig. 5, 6).

Fig. 4. A golden lotus denotes the illuminatioan of all Buddhas. Source: redbubble.com.

Fig. 5. A pink lotus denotes the Buddha and his succession. Source: pinterest.at.

Fig. 6. Lotus, one of the primitive floral symbols of Buddhist art, signifying divine purity, is widely used in the thangka paintings. Source: shaolinchanqijian.com.

Fig. 7. Lotus is also seen as a symbol connoting conversion of negativity to positivity. A Red Lotus is linked with Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of benevolence. It is also associated with the heart and pious temperament. Source: meishu.com.

A red lotus is linked with Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of benevolence. It is also linked with heart and pious temperament. A white lotus signifies a spiritual mental state free of all toxins. Lotus as a symbol connotes the conversion of negativity to positivity (Fig. 7). ***Bodhi tree***, the sacred fig tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, is also portrayed in Thangka painting (Fig. 8). The ***bodhi*** tree signifies the teachings of Buddha, and that everybody has the capability of getting enlightened (Fig. 9). The Thangka '***Enlightened Shakyamuni Buddha***' depicts a magnificently detailed Shakyamuni Buddha sitting under a ***Bodhi*** tree surrounded by ocean of life. According to a tradition, Shakyamuni voyaged extensively throughout the Indian subcontinent sharing his enlightened insight, promoting peace, and educating people the technique to unleash the potential of life. His thoughtful purpose was to empower entire human race to attain enlightenment that he had attained.

Fig. 8. The Buddha under the Bodhi tree. Source: dharmashop.com.

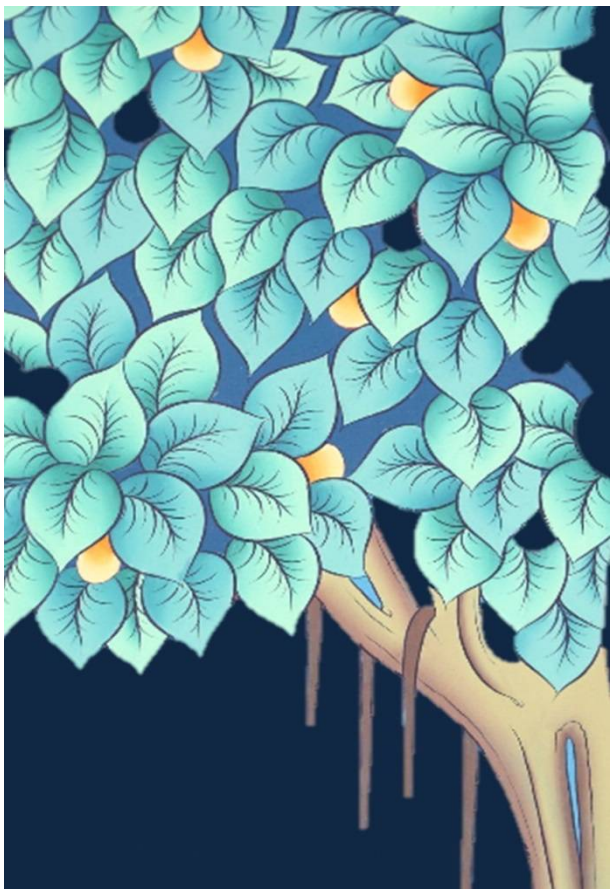

Fig. 9. Bodhi tree (Ficus religiosa) symbolizing enlightment. Source: dharmashop.com.

Mostly the plants are illustrated as trees, bushes or flowers but not in form of forests or pastures. Each single leaf and flower is painted separately as fresh, normally all visible leaves and flowers are facing the observer and the buds are painted in the side view. Tree trunks may be drawn straight or twisted. In addition to the plants portrayed in the landscape, the plants are linked with the holy figures, for instance, the figures holding the flowers or wearing them as crowns or jewellery. The divine figures are shown seated on lotus flower. The lotus is also depicted with natural leaves and stem in water ponds. In many cases, the plants species in Thangka are beyond recognition, some of them may be merely artistic, drawing theme from Chinese or Indian art, while some can be found wild in Himalayan

region. A lotus flower is rarely substituted by a Peony (*Paeonia spp.*), which is a common motif in Thangka art. Jewel-trees or the decorated trees, mentioned in the descriptions of sacred and eco-cultural landscapes, are also depicted in Thangkas.

The Thangka paintings depicts *durva*, *bilva*, mustard seeds, *Chinese oak*, *champak*, *chrysanthemum*, *datura*, *haritaki*, *tamarisk* fruit, *parijat*, etc., each having their own eco-spiritual connotation. In Buddhist iconography, durva (*Poa cynosuroides*) grass symbolizes stability and it is believed that Lord Buddha sat on Durva grass and meditated till he got enlightened. It is also used in tantric rituals. In ecological context, *Poa cynosuroides* is known for its durability. It is believed to be one of the useful pasture and superb fodder grasses, which remain green even during the summers. *Durva* can grow in diverse ecological settings of soil and moisture, enduring the drought. Owing to its long runners that originate at nodes, it helps in prevention of soil erosion and thus stabilizes the soil's strata. Besides its religious significance, it is used in number of ethnic medicinal formulations. Thus, it has same ecological and spiritual connotation, i.e. surviving in all circumstances.

Bilva (*Aegle marmelos*) fruit, one of the eight auspicious substances, has a special place in Buddhist symbolism for its medicinal value and spiritual origin. According to a legend, a tree goddess is believed to have given the Bilva fruit to Lord Buddha during meditation under a tree. In Thangka, bilva is depicted as a group of three fruits, signifying three jewels (Fig. 10). Its leaves are compound, trifoliate with atypical attar. *Aegle marmelos* is one of the sacred trees and its felling is strictly forbidden. Various parts of plants, for instance, leaves, fruits, seeds, provide health and nutrition, enrich the human diet, and have enormous uses against various physical ailments. The ripened fruit has been used as a tonic for heart and brain, and as adjuvant cure of dysentery. Thus, the fruit symbolises auspiciousness and potency of curing diseases (Dutta et al. 2014). Like, Bilva, there are numerous medicinal herbs, which not only possess the curative properties, but play significant role in purifying the environment. Mustard seeds are also depicted in various Buddhist artworks. Vajrapani is believed to have offered the mustard seeds to Buddha, who blessed it as a sacred material to get rid of pessimism and escape evil-spirits. It is generally used in tantric rituals, exorcism and suppression. Mustard seed is used for extracting oil and is believed to relieve problems and defeat evil powers. The portrayal of mustard seeds suggests the removal of negativity, which has become important both in context of materialistic and spiritual world.

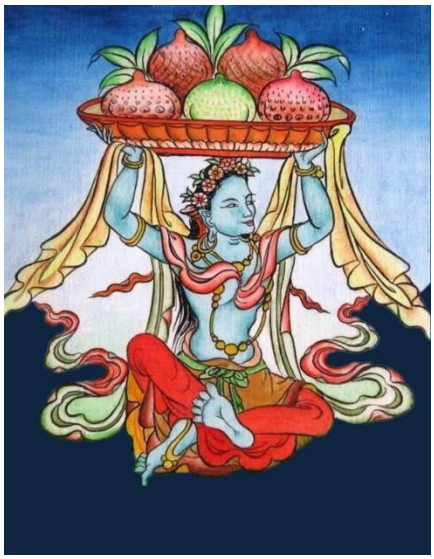

Fig. 10. Bilva (Aegle marmelos) fruit, one of the eight auspicious substances. Source: phubdorjiwang.com.

Ashoka (*Saraca indica*) tree has a symbolic significance in Buddhism. Queen Maya is believed to have given birth to Buddha under Ashoka tree in a garden. According to custom, the queen walked in the garden till she came to Ashoka tree to take rest. Then Ashoka tree mysteriously bent down for her and she gripped a branch. At that moment the Buddha appeared from her right side.

Chinese Oak (*Quercus variabilis*) depicted as tree, personifies splendour and power. The acorns of Chinese Oak are used for curative purpose and its leaves provide food to the wild silkworm. Datura (*Datura stramonium*) named as '*Angel's trumpet*' and believed to invoke a wrathful deity to remove poisons, is depicted in the Thangka paintings. *Amchi System of Medicine* or the *Sowa-Rigpa* is a traditional system of medicine common in many parts of the Himalay. It is one of the most primitive, codified and well-documented living medical traditions. *Sowa*-Rigpa is the 'science of healing' for its rich repository of knowledge, which combines science, art, and philosophy. In the Seventeenth-century Tibet witnessed the development of medical knowledge, with the setting-up of a monastic medical college and the scripting of numerous medical texts including a set of 79 Thangka paintings. Painted between 1687 and 1703, the Thangka paintings are live pieces of scholastic art that intertwine the practical aspects of therapeutic wisdom with the Buddhist traditions. The Thangka depict hundreds of herbs and herbal medications, tree of diagnosis, structure of vulnerable points, diagrams of human anatomy, medical instruments, moxibustion and bloodletting points, human embryology, treatment methods and Medicine Buddha. The most important among these are the Thangkas depicting the medicinal herbs and tree of diagnosis. In order to make a diagnosis, the *amchi* physician observes, feels, and enquires, which are depicted in Thangka by three stems of a tree, which has eight sub-branches and 38 leaves that signify the body parts which seen, touched, or examined (Fig. 11).

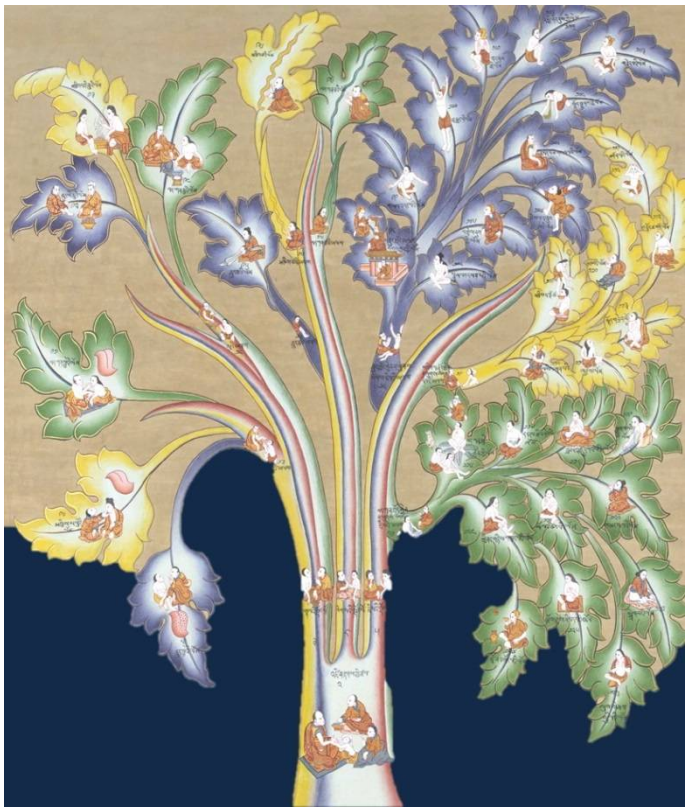

Fig. 11. Haritaki (Terminalia chebula) flower. Medicine Buddha holds a blooming Haritaki plant in left hand. Source: lazerhorse.org.

The plant attributes and their eco-spiritual connotation in Buddhist artworks is presented as in Table 1.

Table 1. The plant attributes and their eco-spiritual connotation in Buddhist artworks

Plant attributes	**Botanical Name**	**Eco-Spiritual connotation**
Ashoka	*Saraca indica*	Depicted as tree or branch, connoting *Yakshi*, the mythological beings
Barley	*Hordeum vulgare*	Shown as ear of barley
Bilva	*Aegle marmelos*	Fruit illustrated as one of the eight auspicious substance
Bodhi-tree	*Ficus religiosa*	Depicted as tree symbolizing enlightenment
Chinese Oak	*Quercus variabilis*	Demonstrated as tree, epitomising majesty and strength
Champak	*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*	Illustrated as a white blossoming flower or as the wish-fulfilling tree. It is an attribute of *Maitreya* Buddha, convening adoration, benevolence & beauty
Chrysanthemum	*Chrysanthemum morifolium*	Depicted as flower, denotes autumn & collection of the harvest. As a symbol of attaining goal of enlightenment & peace
Citron	*Citrus medica*	Illustrated as fruit, symbol of fortune, success and fertility
Corn	*Zea mays*	Presented as ear of corn
Datura	*Datura stramonium*	Flower shown as full bloom, symbolic of peace and benevolence
Durva	*Poa cynosuroides*	Represented as grass being one of the eight auspicious substance
Lotus	*Nelumbo nucifera*	Denoted as flower, attribute of eight auspicious symbol
Mustard	*Brassica nigra*	Seeds, one of the eight auspicious substance
Haritaki	*Terminalia chebula*	Portrayed as fruit and flower, connotes good health. Medicine Buddha holds a blooming Haritaki plant in left hand (Fig. 12).
Naga	*Magnolia champaca*	Flower depicted in the hands of *Bodhisattvas* Maitreya
Parijat	*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*	Shown as wish-fulfilling or divine tree with flowering branches
Tamarisk	*Tamarix indica*	Fruit resembling plum, depicted in the hands of Goddess Arya Cunda Tara and Vasushara
Radish	*Raphanus raphanistrum*	Depicted as root
Rice	*Oryza sativa*	Shown as ear of rice

Fig. 12. Tree of Diagnosis used in Amch Medicine. Source: meditationonlongisland.org.

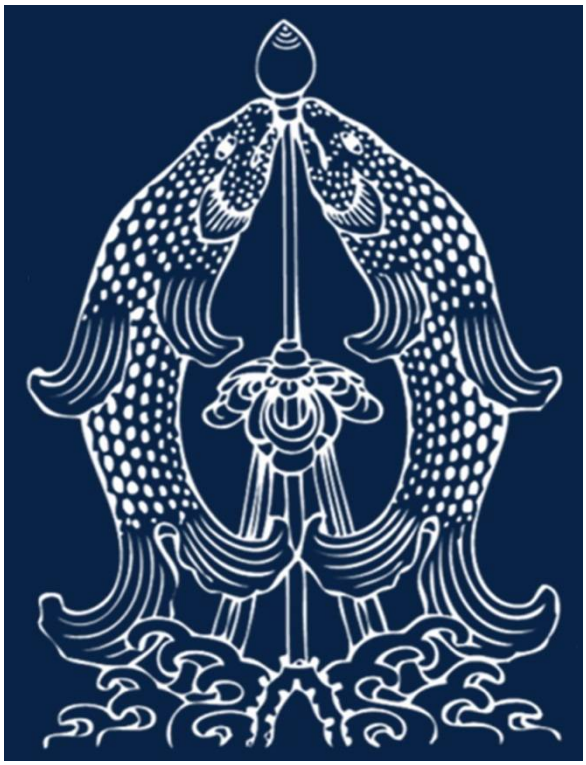

Fig. 13. Golden fishes. Source: uihere.com.

Fig. 14. A couple of goldfish, common in Buddhist art, are suggestive of free life. Source: shaolinchanqijian.com.

Fig. 15. Conch shell gives an awakening call to wake-up from ignorance. Source: shaolinchanqijian.com.

Besides, floral elements, the faunal elements are also seen in Thangka paintings. The faunal features in Thangkas are harmless herbivores, for instance, rabbits or antelopes, though flesh-eaters may also be seen along with fuming figures, each having eco-spiritual significance. Standing or resting birds are portrayed on the ground or swimming in the water. A pair of sea-monsters with a mixture of crocodile and elephant is normally pictured on

a *Maṇḍala* gate. Occasionally, dragons are seen in classical Tibetan Thangkas (Das, 1995). Symbolic representations of natural animals in a landscape, the most distinct, being a pair of goldfish, one of the eight auspicious symbols, is shown swimming in a pond (Fig. 13, 14). The two goldfishes, common in Buddhist art, are suggestive of free life. The ocean is so big with many creatures, but, the fishes still swim freely. It symbolizes good fortune and implies that one can live independently courageously in the life filled with sorrow and illusion. Likewise, the conch shell, one of the eight symbols of Buddhism, depicted in Thangka, gives an awakening call to the followers of righteousness to wake-up from ignorance (Fig. 15) (Beer, 2003).

Sometimes the snow-lions are depicted in Thangka backgrounds (Fig. 16). Snow lion is a celestial animal in Thangka art, which symbolizes heroism, absolute happiness, and the earth element (Fig. 17). It is one of the four dignities. Lion as a symbol compares the Buddha's preaching to its roaring. Lion symbolises the power in the teachings of Buddha and reminds of his majesty. The lion has always been linked with royalty, intellect, and protection. In Buddhism, lions are perceived as icons of Buddha's sons, having the power to pacify everyone and are commonly painted at the entrances of monasteries.

Fig. 16. Snow-lions depicted in Thangka backgrounds. Source: clipartmax.com.

Fig. 17. Snow Lion. Source: shambhala.com.

Precious elephant and horse are among the seven precious jewels depicted in the Buddhist iconography. In Buddhism, the elephant symbolises mental strength. The uncontrolled intellect at the starting of one's journey to self-realization, which can turn wild and finish everything, is represented by a grey elephant. Practising righteousness and humanizing mind can control it and is denoted by a white elephant. Elephant's tusks are one of the seven noble symbols (Beer, 2003). Power and commitment are believed to be the main features of elephant; hence, it becomes an icon of physical and mental strength, along with accountability (Fig. 18).

The depiction of horse symbolises energy and strength. It epitomizes the pran (air) which is vital for life. Horse also signifies devotion, sincerity, speed, and energy. Horse acts as the means of conveyance. In materialistic world, the man use horse as the means of transport, for they can run very fast (Fig. 19). The neigh of a horse is symbolic of Buddha's power to awaken the mind for practicing righteousness.

Fig. 18. The elephant. Source: tr.pinterest.com.

Fig. 19. The horse. Source: in.pinterest.com.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the Tiger is symbol of alertness, compassion and assurance. In Vajrayana tradition many deities are shown riding a tiger and symbolize the power to overcome terror, desire, and ignorance, required for practicing Buddhism. In Thangka painting, a gorgeous Tiger is depicted enclosed by a colourful jungle (Fig. 20).

Fig. 20. The tiger. Source: traditionalartofnepal.com.

Portrayal of peacocks is linked with bodhisattvas. Peacocks are believed to be gifted with the ability to consume the poisonous vegetation without any injurious consequence; likewise, a *bodhisattva* is adept of transmuting ignorance into enlightenment, and hatred into positivity. When one comes across an enlightened thought, the mind unfastens just like the tail of a peacock that unveils all colours. Like a peacock, which makes use of poison to support his body, a *bodhisattva* using pessimism emerges out of materialistic world. Besides holy figures, there are animals, mythic beings, humans and demigods in a Thangka landscape. Human beings illustrated in the Thangkas are mainly the disciples of the main figure. The depictions of other faunal and legendary creatures in Thangka include, deer, water-monster, dragon, antelopes, buffalo, turtle, etc., each have eco-spiritual connotation, for instance – in Table 2.

Table 2. The depictions of other faunal and legendary creatures in Thangka

Faunal elements/ legendary creatures	**Scientific Name**	**Eco-Spiritual connotation**
Antelope	*Antilocapra americana*	Symbolises peaceful yoga and tranquillity
Ape	*Hominoidea*	Signifies greed and untrained mind. In a positive sense it symbolizes perseverance
Buffalo	*Bubalus bubalis*	Yama's pedestal
Crow	*Corvus splendens*	Symbolises impudence
Deer	*Odocoileus virginianus*	Denotes empathy
Dog	*Canis lupus familiaris*	Attribute of pride
Dragon	Serpent-like legendary creature	Symbolises power, dominance over the sea, and water element (Fig. 21)
Elephant	*Elephas maximus*	Symbol of the calm splendour and strength of mind; elephant tusks depicted as representative of the entire animal
Fish /Golden fishes	Mythological fish in Buddhist iconography	One of the eight auspicious symbols; symbolises that all living beings are engrossed in the sea of materialistic life
Garud	Legendary bird or bird-like creature in Buddhist mythology	Wisdom, control over the sky, and the fire element
Hare	*Lepus spp.*	Part of *Four Immortal Friends*
Horse	*Equus spp.*	Symbolises energy and strength
Wind-horse	Legendary creature	Signifies good fortune
Lion	*Panthera leo*	Denotes courage, control over peaks, and earth element
Snow-lion	Celestial animal in Buddhism	Depicts reconciliation of conflict and differences
Marmot	*Marmota spp.*	Indicates rebirth
Naga	Mythical serpent beings	Represents guards of Buddha and righteousness; also icon of mortals that

		spread illness and bad luck when annoyed.
Peacock	*Pavo cristatus*	Signifies positive transformation
Pig	*Sus scrofa domesticus*	Indicates ignorance
Red coral	*Corallium*	Depicts a symbolic offering and a wish for achievement; the red coral is used for ornamentation
Right-turning conch	*Turbinella pyrum*	One of the eight auspicious symbols connoting the resounding words of righteousness (Fig. 22)
Cockerel or cock	*Gallus Gallus domesticus*	Signifies attachment and desire
Snake	*Serpentes*	Symbolise abhorrence or hatred, but also the understanding of five Buddha, five elements and five colours. The serpents signify the desire
Swan	*Cygnus spp.*	Linked with Goddess Tara
Tiger	*Panthera tigris*	Mount of certain deities; skin worn around waist signifies the removal of the wrong belief. Connotes confidence, supremacy over forest, and air element
Turtle	*Testudines spp.*	Shows constant bliss
Wolf	*Canis lupus*	Indicative of beast of deities

Dorje Gotrab Thangka depicts the wrathful Guru Rinpoche Dorje Gotrab a powerful Buddhist protector and deity, especially important in the Nyingma tradition and considered the destroyer of diseases and epidemics. In the Thangka painting, the deity is presented riding a nine-headed buffalo and enclosed by flames with Garud and Vajrapani at the top (Fig. 23).

The months in the traditional Tibetan calendar are also represented by hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, ape, bird, dog, pig, mouse, bull and tiger (Das, 1995).

Rhinoceros horn, elephant's tusks, and branched corals are among the seven jewel insignia of Chakravartin, where the faunal elements are used for the illustration of the later. The symbolic emblems include '*Three triumphant creatures of harmony*', '*Four Immortal Friends*', and '*Wheel and deer emblem*', etc. These depictions have eco-spiritual significance for the reason that these have both spiritual and ecological elements.

Of the various themes depicted in Thangka, the illustration of Jatak tales and other sacred manuscripts is common. '*Four Immortal Friends*' is one of the unique themes of Thangka painting which portrays a memorable relationship between four animals, i.e., elephant, monkey, rabbit, and bird, which are typically unlike (Fig. 24) (Sahni, 2012).

Fig. 21. Dragon. Source: rutimge.pw.

Fig. 22. Right-turning Conch. Source: tibethouse.us.

Fig. 23. Dorje Gotrab Thangka. Source: traditionalartofnepal.com.

The painting depicts an elephant supporting a monkey, who in turns supports a rabbit and the rabbit supports a bird to get fruits from a tree. Painting symbolises interdependence, harmony, and unity among the animals of different size and strength living in the forests. It epitomizes bond, collaboration, good relation without judging the order, power, or size. In eco-spiritual context, it describes bird as Buddha himself, the rabbit as ***Sheribu*** (Shari Putra), the monkey as ***Mou-Gelgi-Bu*** (Mugyalyana), and the elephant as ***Kingau*** (Ananda). The painting instils the virtues of reverence for elders, teamwork, and kindness. The story of the four friends as narrated by Lord Buddha to his disciples goes like:

> Once in a forest, four animals, an elephant, a rabbit, a monkey, and a bird debated for the ownership of a tree where all of them attempted to feed on. The elephant demanded it for he was the first to spot the tree. The monkey claimed that it was his for he had been feeding on the fruits. The rabbit appealed that he had been eating the leaves of the tree when the tree was a small sapling. The bird who was watching the dispute said that the tree belonged to it because the tree wouldn't have grown-up if it had not spit the seed from the fruit it had eaten. The elephant, monkey, and rabbit, paid obeisance to the bird

and considered it as their elder brother. The four animals became friends and determined to share the tree together by enjoying its beauty, fragrance, fruits, and shade. Standing on each other's' backs, they reached the banyan tree.

This story highlights the importance of living together which in scientific terms is the symbiotic relationship, where one organism benefits another. Symbiosis is an ecological relationship between two species living in close proximity. Organisms in symbiotic association have developed a mechanism to harness a unique niche that other organism offers. According to another version:

In one of the previous incarnations of Lord Buddha, in a forest, there lived four noble beings – a bird, a monkey, a rabbit, and an elephant. One day they resolved to express gratitude to the eldest among them. The younger expressed reverence for the older by carrying the older on his back. Accordingly, the four expressed their respect. The elephant placed the bird on the crown of his head, the rabbit on the neck, and the monkey on the back. Then, the bird whispered that they must keep the five basic disciplines throughout their lives. The bird started it with wings, the elephant with tusks, the rabbit with paws, and the monkey with pelt.

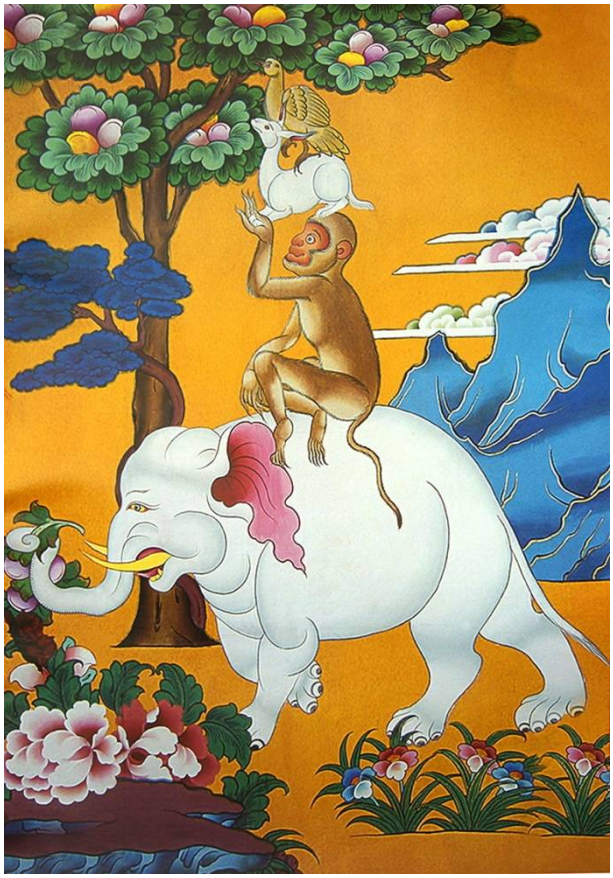

Fig. 25. Selfless Rabbit and God Shakra. Source: himalayanart.org.

Fig. 24. Four Immortal Friends. Source: roundtheclockstories.blogspot.com.

According to Lhadip Ugen Lhundup, a renowned painter, the painting '*Four Immortal Friends'* must have originated in Tibet and came to Bhutan and its theme could have derived from *Kanjur* and *Tenjur*, the ancient Buddhist scriptures. This is a story of interdependence, which enlightens that there is no place for self-appreciation and emphasizes on helping each other. It is held that whenever the Thangka picture of four animals is exhibited, the ten virtues increases and the mind attain a state of equilibrium.

Shakyamuni Buddha, the moral stories drawn from the previous life of Buddha, portrays harmony in nature and Budhha as animal, who was benevolent, for instance, the story of *bodhisattva* who was born as selfless rabbit and God Shakra (Fig. 25).

> Even as a rabbit, he has unbelievable quality, righteousness, magnificence, and vitality; so much so that the other animals regarded him as a king. Among his dedicated admirers, three animals, viz. an otter, a jackal, and a monkey became his closest disciples and friends. They forgot their animal instinct and became kind-hearted. Once, it was decided that the following day, each one of them would offer some gift to anyone who passes through the forest. Everyone had enough to offer, but the rabbit had nothing except petty blades of grass; hence, he decided to offer his own flesh to the visitor. Hearing this, Shakra god, went to test the animals in disguise form as a tired nomad. He was starving and crying in misery. The four animals ran to help him. The otter was able to provide fish, the jackal a lizard and some sour milk and the monkey some ripe mangoes. The rabbit explained that he will offer his body and then, without hesitancy, jumped into flames. But, Shakra pulled out the rabbit and then lifted him up into heaven and presented him before other gods.

For being the glorious instance of the animal *bodhisattva*, Shakra decorated the top of his palace with an image of a rabbit and festooned the face of the moon with the same image. This story has been portrayed in the Thangka painting and shows the self-sacrificing nature of rabbit, the virtue required to be learnt from the animal and adopt the same in the life, to make the place worth living. In another story, the *bodhisattva* was portrayed as a baby quail, which lived in a nest, amidst a dense grove along with his brothers and sisters. He was very young and his wings had not developed and the limbs were not noticeable. Even as a simple baby bird, the *bodhisattva* had not lost his cognizance of right or wrong and refused to feed on any of the living organisms brought by his parents. He used to feed on vegetable matter and due to lack of proper diet, he remained weak and small. One day a fire broke up in the forest and all the forest animals escaped in fear. Immediately, his family also left, except for the *bodhisattva* who had not enough strength to leave the nest. He remained in peace. As the fire approached near his nest, he calmly said, "*my feet are not strong and my wings are not capable of flying. My parents have left and I have nothing to offer you*". Listening this, the fire turned back. This story is also painted as Thangka and speaks about the virtue of honesty and truth. In the tale of self-sacrifice, *bodhisattva* is portrayed as a large elephant, which lived in a forest with a deep and wide lake surrounded by high mountains. The Elephant lived alone and sustained his body only on leaves and lotus roots, devoting his time to meditate on the virtues of satisfaction and equanimity.

> One day when he was roving in the forest, he heard the cries of humans. Out of sympathy, he ran towards them and saw a crowd of men, women, and children, all virtually dead from hunger. Seeing that they were fearful of him, he in a human voice told them not to be scared. They told him that they had been exiled by an annoyed king and that many of them had already died. The kind Elephant realized that the fruit in the forest would not be sufficient to feed them even for a day. He determined that he must offer his own flesh as food and his organs and intestines as bags to carry water. Then, he told them that beyond the lake, they would find the body of an elephant that fell down from a peak, not revealing that it would be his own body. As they move toward water, he quickly climbed the mountain through another route and threw himself over

the edge of the cliff. Meanwhile, the group reached the lake where they found the body of an elephant. But, they were able to recognize him and seeing his gratitude, they burst into tears. Some of them decided not to eat the flesh of noble soul but one of them explained that the right way to respect the elephant would be to eat his flesh as desired by him. The people ate till they were full, made stacks to hold water, and travelled.

This story depicted in Thangka reveals about the generosity of nature and its elements and what all it offers to save the life of other beings, without taking care of its own self. While on the other hand, the man has become so cruel and harsh that he has started disturbing nature, killing animals for his own pleasure, without comprehending that, he has to survive on the same earth, which he is destroying to satisfy his greed. Thus, these stories and paintings serve as source of inspiration for humans to learn lesson. These stories, in which the Buddha often appears as an animal or tree, instil ethics of self-sacrifice, kindness, morality, and other moral values (Jones et al. 2016). In these painting, the Buddha is depicted acting with kindness toward the natural world. These richly portrayed birth paintings are truly like the poetic indebtedness of nature. These rejoice jungles, water bodies, and living organisms. In the *Rukkha dhamma Jatak*, Buddha told a story of his past life as a spirit of a Sal (*Shorea robusta*) tree in the Himalay. The story goes like:

During the rule of King Vessav, the trees, shrubs, bushes, and plants were all asked to opt for a new habitat. The Buddha-tree directed all his relatives to avoid trees that stood alone and to take up their habitats in the forest. The vegetative spirits obeyed his suggestion, but the egoistic and irrational ones preferred to live outside hamlets and settlements, to earn the benefits given by the citizens who adore such trees. They left the jungle and came to reside huge trees in an open space. One day a storm cleaned over the countryside. The isolated trees were hurt badly, their branches broken, their trunks stooped, and they were uprooted. But its fury was in vain in the Sal forest.

This story laid stress to realize the potency of the interdependence of life. Man-centric ego is often quoted as a reason for environmental degradation. In race for achieving higher goals, the man has attained this arrogance, which can blur his sense of moral obligation. The question of the unnecessary use of power by man plays an important role in ecological debates. Nature acts as a treasured tool for spiritual practice, where nature acts as an educator. This is commonly mentioned in the Buddhist texts where monks learn about the temporary aspect of materialistic world from the changes they perceive in nature. Hence in Thangka, these animals are shown as an illustration of congruence. There are different versions of story, but all of them have the same moral – respect and love to live amicably. None of them were concerned with self; rather each one was concerned for helping other rather than being self-centred. This depiction is truly applicable in the present context, where all the countries should amicably unite together to find out solution to the present day environmental problems.

'*Three triumphant creatures of harmony*' represent the pairing of six traditional enemies – *garud* and snow lion, otter and fish, crocodile and sea snail – creating the three supernatural creatures, which are considered as the icons of universal love (Fig. 26). The combination of contraries give rise to the amazing symbols, where the mythical beings of rival animal pairs are combined to exemplify harmony, for instance, a snow lion and a garud, usually the worldly enemies are joined to form an animal with a body of snow lion and head and wings of

a *garud*. Likewise, a fish is merged with an otter. The combined organisms are often depicted on the victory banners symbolising the reconciliation of conflict and differences.

Fig. 26. Three triumphant creatures of harmony, which are considered as the icons of universal love. Source: kagyulibrary.hk.

Fig. 27. Wheel and deer emblem. Source: spiritualray.com.

In '*Wheel and deer emblem*', the '*Dharma Wheel*', one of the eight auspicious symbols is usually seen between two deer, which denotes Buddha's first doctrine in a deer park. When Buddha delivered his first sermon, the deer also gathered around and enjoyed the divine discourse. Depiction of deer on either sides of a '*Dharma Wheel*' reminds that Buddha valued all living beings and not just humans (Fig. 27). Besides being a character of legends and myths, the deer symbolises personification of virtues and character.

Dragon, lion, tiger and *garud*, symbolizing four directions are the four supernatural creatures which surrounds the four corners of Buddhist flag, with wind horse in the middle of the flag. Snow Lion is portrayed in the East and symbolizes absolute happiness, a clear mind free from distrust. It synchronizes magnificence and self-esteem of body and mind. The Snow Lion has vitality of virtuousness and a sense of enjoyment. Tiger is depicted in

the South, signifying self-confidence, kindness and modesty. It is calm yet motivated and has an innate sense of contentment and realization, denoting the state of enlightenment. Wind horse, a legendary creature, unites the speed of wind and strength of horse and is believed to convey the prayers from earth to heaven. It is linked with victory and space element. The Wind Horse with the wish fulfilling jewel of enlightenment is one of the most common symbols of prayer flags. It signifies good fortune. The traditional wind horse prayer flag depicts wind horse in the centre, and in four corners the four dignities: the *garud* (wisdom), the Dragon (gentle power) the Snow Lion (fearless joy), and the Tiger (confidence). Besides various invocations and verses, the eight lucky symbols are presented around the boundary (Beer, 2003). The *garud* is brave and shown in the north. With power it rises without holding back and signifies freedom from fears. It is a potent remedy to the negative influences of *nagas*, which results in disease. Displaying a dragon is believed to protect one from defamation and improves status. The Dragon roars in the sky with benevolence that awakens one from misunderstanding.

In Thangka and other Buddhist iconography, right-turning conch (*Turbinella pyrum*) shell represents the deep, harmonious and pervasive sound of righteousness, which awakens disciples from the deep sleep of ignorance and encourages them to realize their own welfare and the wellbeing of others. After experiencing profound and blissful enlightenment, Buddha remained isolated in the forest in an apprehension that no one would be able to understand his experience. The heavenly King Indra offered Buddha a white conch shell and asked him to share his experience and teach righteousness. The Buddha blessed the conch shell as a symbol of resounding words of dharma.

Some animals are bestowed with the mystic powers and are known as '*divine or mythical animals*', on account of their phenomenal birth like that of a demigod. The animals, like swans, peacocks, and deer are preferred by gods and often symbolized in the celestial gardens, while the semi-divine beings, like *yakshas* and *gandharvas* that live on mountains or trees are also portrayed. The floral and faunal elements can also be seen in the weapons painted in the art forms, for instance, flower bow and flower arrow, flower hook and flower noose, tiger-skin bow case and leopard skin quiver, scorpion-hilted sword, scorpion and serpent snare. Lotus, wish-granting tree conch shell, wolf, bull, and tiger banner, yak-tail flywhisk, peacock feathers and peacock-feathered fan, mirror and umbrella are the hand emblems and ritual attributes are depicted in Thangka paintings.

The landscape elements of Thangka exhibit sights of snowy mountains, lush green meadows, streams and waterfalls. In principle, the Thangka backgrounds represent pure land and water. Typical sceneries with perfect backdrop of mountains, green hills and water are depicted in the Thangkas (Fig. 28). The weather in the paintings seems to be summer or spring, with snow only on the mountaintops. Rarely, the thunderclouds or lightning flash and distant rain are shown. The landscapes are made to match the lively sparkling nature which reflects the imaginations of embodiments of enlightenment. The landscapes are usually painted according to the textual sources or based on oral narratives. The most common are Buddha, *Amitabha's Sukhavati* and Guru Padmasambhava's Mountain. Nevertheless, the landscapes are eccentric, in most of the paintings, the individual occupy most part of the painting without much scope for background landscape. Hence, only the thin areas between the auras and lotus thrones are depicted in the landscapes.

Fig. 28. Lush Green Landscape with mountains, river, flora and clouds. Source: exoticindiaart.com.

Fig. 29. Thangka depicting Worship of Ovoo, a sacred Mongolian mountain. Source: arcworld.org.

Fig. 30. Thangka 'White Old Man of Mongolian mythology' with traditional symbols of endurance. Source: paintingvalley.com.

A remarkable painting having eco-spiritual connotation is the one depicting '*Ovoo Worship*' common in Mongolia (Fig. 29). *Ovoo*, a sacred Mongolian mountain is generally a remarkable mountain with an unusual shape sustaining flora, fauna, water sources, and '*Ovoo*', the piles

of stones, indicating its sacredness. People passing by make offerings to the '*Ovoo*' to bless their journey and the contented spirits are believed to confer fertile land, pleasant weather conditions, health, and prevent natural calamities. '*Ovoo*' worship is an eco-spiritual practice in Mongolia and is often depicted in the Thangka paintings.

Tsagaan Uvgun, the '*White Old Man of Mongolian mythology*', is also portrayed in Thangka paintings encircled by six traditional symbols of endurance: a divine peach tree, a conch-shaped rock, a crane, the crystal rosary, a pure stream emerging from a sacred rock, and a deer – which are believed to be the creatures capable of tracing the plants of immortality (Fig. 30).

In Tibetan Buddhism, the white old man is known as Tsering Tuk or the *Bodhisattva* of Longevity and is portrayed in a serene landscape with a deer, water and cranes. Some of the monks and people are depicted making offering to a stream, while others are shown adoring a sacred '*Ovoo*' for protecting the mountains. Some people are shown moving out into the landscape to perform animal liberating ceremony so that they can move without fear from human beings. In another scene, monks are shown performing worship and begging the *nagas* of the trees to excuse those who cut them down. The tree-cutters are shown declaring guilt. Thus, the pictorial representation has an eco-spiritual connotation, where on one hand it depicts the elements of nature beholding life, and on the other hand, it shows the age-old traditions of worshipping these elements for ensuring happy and prosperous life. The man-nature interface is significant, because it is the man who is responsible for disturbing the ecological balance, and once he understands his fault, he makes confession for begetting nature's equilibrium. The same understanding has become the need of the hour in the contemporary scenario and it is the high time, when man has to admit his mistake and restore back nature's balance. The symbols of long life and natural harmony depicted in the painting are:

– Peaches (*Prunus persica*): The fruits of eternal life, signifying the abundance of natural world;

– Pine tree (*Pinus spp*.): Being evergreen symbolises long life and signifies man's need and dependence on vegetation;

– Water: With qualities of being pure, cool, curative, odour free, comforting, pleasant, light and smooth qualities denotes the significance of pure, uncontaminated quality both for consumption and nurturing life on earth;

– Rock: The rock, which does not change and reveals nature's magnificence, lay emphasis on the fact that man is only a small fragment of big universe;

– Cranes (*Grus grus*): Thought to be the most long-lived birds;

– Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*): Vehicle of Tsagaan Uvgun, who is sometimes, presented riding a stag. Deer, like holy a saint is believed to sleep at a different place every night.

The faunal elements demonstrated in the painting shows that man must show reverence for the biodiversity, to ensure continuation of life and a place that is harmonious. In order to conserve biodiversity, man has to stop chopping-off trees, chasing animals and upsetting their natural habitats. The six symbols motivate man to cherish all life forms on earth. Even today, the folk beliefs in serpents in the Himalayan region discourage people from polluting streams for the fear of annoying serpents living in them.

Besides this, the planetary symbols shown in the Thangka include the sun, moon, rainbow, and five elements , viz. earth, water, fire, air, and space. The earth element represents the quality of firmness or fascinating energies. Matter with prominent captivating forces

symbolises earth element. In Thangka art, the earth element or land is described vividly. The majority of land depicted comprises of green hills, indicative of mountain pastures. Mountain in the Thangkas depicts the firmness, concentration and stability of subtle form. To some extent, the hills are shaded to get three-dimensional impression (Beer, 2003). The outlines of mountains are fragmented by representing rows often positioned as small spots, which gives an impression of plants, clumps of grass, small bushes, or distant trees with dark green colour. Besides meadows, the pointed stones with rough and curved edges with blue, green or brownish shades and bordered with golden lines are depicted. The holes or caves with an emerging rivulet are shown to enhance the beauty of the painting. Normally, a mountain range behind green peaks, against the blue sky is painted with snow. The mountaintops often rounded by snow or extremely sharp snowy peaks are well-illustrated. The colour of mountains varies from white to light blue and the boundaries of enclosing snow are highlighted with dark blue colour. Rock formation with water emanating from the mouth is also depicted in the paintings, which represent four great rivers, viz. Sutlej, Indus, Brahmaputra, and Karnali, which originate in the Mount Kailash. The sources of these rivers were believed to be the springs originating from the rock formations in the likeness of the heads of an elephant, lion, horse and peacock respectively. Mount Meru, the sacred five-peaked mountain of Buddhist cosmology and believed to be the hub of all physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes, is also portrayed in these paintings.

According to Buddhist belief, water element represents the relative motion, while fire element signifies the energy and is shown in the Thangkas. The water is portrayed in form of rivulets, waterfalls and pools that passes through the landscape. The water is shown in a conventional style and it appears to be some kind of solid body rather than liquid without transparency or reflection. Water is often divided into zones by rippling white or blue lines. The water body represents the unfamiliar, immeasurable depth of knowledge. Air or wind element denotes the value of extension or repulsive forces. Any entity having one or more of these attributes is known as matter. The materialistic world is believed to be nothing but a permutation of these attributes arranged in the space. The matter that is perceived in mind is just a mental interpretation of these qualities. In addition to the four elements, the Buddhism talks about space and consciousness element, later described as '*pure* and *bright*' and used to appreciate the feelings of pleasure, pain and state of equilibrium between the two.

Fig. 31. Clouds in Thangka paintings.
Source: in.pinterest.com.

In normal vibrant Thangkas, the sky is blue, though other colours may also be seen. The colour is shadowed so that the hue becomes darker while moving upwards. Mostly, there are two kinds of clouds in a Thangka landscape, viz. plump cumulus-type and layered stratus-type. The plump cumulus-type may appear both behind hills and high in the sky, while the layered stratus-type float just on the upper atmosphere. The basic pattern of clouds is a line of round lobes or series of lobes rising from behind (Fig. 31).

Often the clouds are portrayed in coil shape with a dark hole in the middle. The colour of clouds may be light blue, grey or green but they may be pink, yellow or orange, even brownish. Clouds of different colours and shapes can be seen same painting. The trefoil cloud signifies the body, mind and speech of Buddha, while floating clouds or mist is the unification of compassion and wisdom for self-realization. Clouds may come and go, like the temporary thoughts or misapprehensions, which seem to confuse mind's true nature. Rainbows are commonly shown in Thangka landscapes with twists or loops. Thangka rainbows may consist of four colours or even less. The rainbow is eternity's representation of temporary happiness. The sun and moon are depicted in the sky of Thangka landscape in two different corners. The sun is painted in orange or red colour, while the colour of moon is white or light blue. In Buddhism, the sun symbolizes wisdom, while the moon is a symbol of compassion.

Conclusion

Above discussion, reveals that there is a link between eco-spirituality and art, which directly or indirectly enables the conservation of environment. Thangka painting is a manifestation of soul, its reverence for nature's splendour and personification of its motivation. It is a gentle expression of colours, fine lines, shapes and figures. Nature stirs man's emotional and cognitive behaviour. Aesthetics has always been of interest for it unveils the bond between nature and man and the changes occurring in the two. Though man is the integral element of natural environments, his visualization is a reflection of his thoughts, behaviour and culture. Visual art reflects man's inner wisdom of beauty in nature and life. The artwork not only speaks of the artistic skills of artists but about their deep ecological and spiritual concern for nature and its elements. With growing concern for linking ecology, culture, and spirituality, conserving the art forms and learning lessons from these, the scientific community can develop an outlook of sustainability.

Acknowledgement: The source of Thangka Paintings/ Illustrations used in the paper is duly acknowledged. Some of these have been modified as per the requirement of the theme.

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