ABSTRACT

Riding the White Elephant, Blossoming the Golden Flower: Symbols of Self-Realization in the Kanfugen-Gyō

In this presentation I intend to show how Buddhism at the level of symbolic psychology is a path of self-realization. Metaphors of entelechy in The Threefold Lotus Sūtra support the universality of Jung's theory of individuation. The examples of elephant mastery and flower blooming in the Kanfugen-Gyō reflect spiritual transformation processes in the manner of a realization of potentiality through progressive stages. Many of the symbols of the Self Jung listed in Aion are operative, plus the sense of their development as signals for psychic energy transformations in the practitioner.

Amplification of Buddhist symbols extends back to Hindu myths, Jātaka tales, and earlier sūtras. The elephant symbol develops both within the sūtra and in the course of the whole Veda-Theravāda-Mahāyāna tradition, paralleling the individual and collective unconscious levels of evolution.

Riding the white elephant symbolizes, briefly, the taming of instinct or the purification of unredeemed Buddha-Nature. It comes out clearly in the Buddha-carita that the legendary Buddha takes over for Indra as an elephant-Riding King of the Gods. Next, to "see transformed elephants" stresses the transmutation of base psychic energy to the disposal of the will. Then the development of the motif into a "six-tusked white elephant-king" represents mastery of the sixfold world of samsāra, with the king indicating a progression from theriomorphic to anthropomorphic symbolism, meaning a greater conscious realization. These processes are essential to civilization.

The sūtra prophesizes what the practitioner will dream after meditating on Fugen-bōsatsu (Skt. Samanta-bhadra). I interpret this remarkable dream, distinguishing its universally human symbolism from its East Asian cultural conditioning as it passed through Sanskrit-Chinese-Japanese-English translations. The elephant, diamond-man, and Bodhisattva in the dream-vision are interpreted as progressive stages in the self-realization process of a Buddhist. The difficulty of such self-transformation finds an apt metaphor in the diamond-pounder. The diamond body goal can be traced through the Vajraceddiya Sūtra, Tibetan and Japanese esotericism, Chinese and European Alchemy.

In America our conscious associations with the elephant--white, pink, or otherwise--do not suggest that it could have the religious significance it does for India. But Esther Harding in The Way of All Women shows how a recurring dream of a mother elephant made a woman realize she was pregnant and led her to rise to the task. The mother elephant personified the maternal instinct, to be sure, but the whole experience provided a rare glimpse into the woman's self-realization process. This autochthonous revival shows the universality of the symbol and the collective unconscious at work in both sexes during widely removed epochs in the East and West.

There are sociological factors to be considered in the appearance of a golden flower blossoming in the Kanfugen-Gyō. Nevertheless, it naturally expands upon the role of consciousness in realizing potentiality. While there may have been Taoist influence on the sūtra, the cultures of China and India on the surface are drastically different, and yet the golden lotus motif is common to both.
Dear Mr. McCarty:

The Program Committee for the conference "Jungian Perspectives on Creativity and the Unconscious" met this past week, and I am pleased to inform you that the members selected your paper for delivery.

We look forward to welcoming you to the conference hosted by Miami University June 2-4, 1979 here in Oxford, Ohio. I hope personally to have the opportunity of meeting and talking with you.

Enclosed are general instructions for papers to be presented at the conference. By early April we shall have the programs printed and in the mail to you so that you can locate exactly your place on the program. Included on the program will be information on registration, travel to and from Oxford (we shall arrange to have shuttle buses service to and from the Cincinnati Airport Friday through Monday night), lodging and meals, etc.

Thank you again for your interest in the conference and for letting us consider your paper. We look forward to its presentation.

Cordially,

Donald W. Fritz
Conference Director

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