

The lotus: Rebirth of the self

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<Abstract>

In this study of the symbolism of the lotus used in sandplay therapy, I aim to explore symbols of the lotus based on my personal experiences from a range of angles, thereby identifying the various meanings of the symbols to individuals. A symbol does not have the primary universal meaning of an object itself. Instead, it is significant in that it can unify opposite poles and their inherent tension by projecting its archetypal energy. In this study, I determined the general characteristics and archetypal meanings of the lotus, and provided an understanding of its symbolic meanings in mythologies, stories, and religions. I also analyzed the similarities between the lotus, as represented as the center of each chakra, and the individuation process in Jungian psychology. In many cultures and religions, the lotus has been considered to be sacred and connected to the birth of a god. It also symbolizes birth, creation, richness, rebirth, feminine, and sanctity. Thus, in this study, I reached the conclusion that the lotus is the archetype of the self that has been sent with the purpose of uniting one's mind, which is likely to be separated from the unconscious by unilateral consciousness, and that the lotus to me meant the birth of the feminine and served as a symbolic medium of the emergence of a new self.

Keywords : lotus, chakra, individuation, the self, rebirth

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I . Introduction

I used to be quite an achievement-driven and service-oriented woman until about seven years ago when, during a Sandplay therapy training workshop, I began to realize that I functioned in a very one-sided way and another part of me was suppressed and marginalized. While this has been an important insight for me, I have had a difficult time since then in dealing with the subsequent changes that I have noticed in myself. The catalyst seems to have occurred as I was putting a lotus flower into a sand tray, and as I thought about its meaning I found myself struggling with my feelings.

Usually I am very self-controlled, and do not often show my emotions in public, although I sometimes shed tears while watching a sad movie and feel happy doing household chores which have been neglected. Placing the lotus flower in the sand tray, I sensed how I became emotional and excited about it. Around that time, I was aware that there were changes happening in my life, but I was not pleased with them. I had to admit to values that I had not put much emphasis on and accept the way I was, but I felt confused at the same time, as it was unlike me to be feeling this way. I saw no end to my confusion as I did not believe that change or rebirth would follow the confusion. For this reason, my interest in the lotus flower withered instead of growing further.

I wondered if there could be a fateful connection between myself and the lotus. The meaning of my name is “a beautiful lotus” in Chinese characters. When people see the Chinese characters of my name they usually ask me if I am a Buddhist. At first I wondered why, because I am not a Buddhist; however, I remember feeling interested when they asked the question. Pondering my connection with the lotus, I recalled there were always lotuses in a small and not very clean pond at the back of my elementary school playground. I was not sure why, but I felt fascinated when I saw the lotuses blooming in the pond. I was amazed because the lotuses were so beautiful even though they grew in a rather dirty pond. At the time, I did not even think about the lotuses being rooted in the muck at the bottom of the pond. Now, even more curious about this beautiful flower, I began to do some research.

II. The lotus

Early in the course of my research, I found a lotus love story, ‘On the Love of the Lotus’, by Joo moo-sook who was strongly attracted to the lotus during the period of the Song Dynasty in China. His story discusses the ecological features of the lotus and represents it well. Ju moo-sook says that the lotus is a flower of the noble man who can gaze at it as it grows straight and clean, and that it cannot be an object of desire. The lotus bloom opens in the mud but does not get dirty. It also does not get disrupted when washed with clean water. The lotus flower became the flower of virtuous men in the early years of the Joseon Dynasty period under the influence of ‘On the Love of the Lotus.’ From that time on, wherever scholars resided in Seoul or other regions, they would create large and small ponds and traditional pavilions (Yoon, 2009).

When I decided to write about the lotus, I researched the botanical characteristics of it (Lee, 2008). The lotus is a perennial aquatic plant belonging to the water lily family. It grows naturally or is cultivated for ornamental purposes and medicinal use in northeast and southeast Asia. The shield-shaped leaves (Figure 1), about 40 centimeters in diameter with a whitish- green color, spring up to lie on top of the water and usually do not get wet. The



Figure 1. Lotus plant showing flowers, seed pods, and leaves

(Source of the photo: <http://blog.daum.net/soon5223/8750326>)

time of flowering differs, depending on the area. In Korea the lotus flowers in July and August. Usually it is pink or white. A flower stalk grows out from the root and one large bloom 15-20 centimeters in diameter flowers at the end of the flower stalk.

The different parts of the lotus each have their uses. The leaves are used as an astringent and haemostatic or used as a folk remedy treatment for bed-wetting. The stalk in the ground is called the lotus root; this is used as a raw vegetable or for cooking because it has a relatively high content of vitamins and minerals. The rhizome and fruit are used as a medicine for women's diseases. For all these reasons, the lotus is a popular flower because all parts of it (roots, leaves and fruits) are beneficial and the flower looks pure and beautiful.

Throughout history the symbolic potency of the lotus has increased as its ecological characteristics became imbued with religious meaning. This has particularly been the case in many other countries where Buddhism was introduced and adopted, especially in China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Indeed, the lotus is the national flower of India where Buddhism originated, even though it is a minority religion there now.

In the following section, I will discuss some attributes of the symbolism of the lotus and their roots in art, mythology, fairytales, and religion.

1. The archetypal lotus

In the Assyrian, Phoenician, and Hittite civilizations, and in Greek and Roman art, the lotus had a funereal, "burying" connotation, and thus it symbolized death and rebirth, resurrection and the afterlife, and nature's regeneration. Cooper (1978) writes that the lotus represents the resurrection of the sun because it opens at sunrise and closes at sunset and that it also symbolizes renaissance, creation, fecundity, renewal, immortality and perfection of beauty. According to Iamblicus, the Neo-Platonic philosopher, the lotus symbolizes perfection because its leaves, flowers and fruits are all circular, with each part of the lotus having a different meaning. Sometimes, the lotus symbolizes the birth of divine and superhuman beings because they survive in muddy water. In creation myths, it is said that many gods are born from a lotus and return to a lotus. The lotus flower is known to give infinite life in the afterlife and is considered even more significant in relation to sun worship because it

blossoms at sunrise and fades at sunset (Yoon, 2009).

The lotus is sometimes used as a symbol in funeral motifs. In west Asian and Italian cultures, it may mean resurrection (Tresidder, 2000). The iconography of the Maya civilization in Central America describes the lotus in terms of regeneration. In ancient Egypt, the water lily was regarded as a holy object that was used for special occasions, such as dedications, funerals, and festivals in daily life.

In summary, a lotus often has the symbolic meaning of resurrection, creation, fecundity, renewal, perfection, numinosum, and femininity.

2. The lotus in myths and fairytales

In Korea, there is a folk tale about a girl who was reborn in a lotus. In the story Shim Chung, an extremely devoted daughter, sold herself for three hundred sacks of rice, which were offered to Buddha for the safety of sailors, and then jumped into the sea on behalf of her blind father. After a while, a huge lotus with a mysterious light shining from it bloomed in the sea. The king picked the lotus, thereby saving Chung who was reborn from the lotus and subsequently got married to the King. The story finishes with Shim Chung giving a banquet for the blind, meeting her father again, and living a happy life. I wondered what the meaning of the lotus in this story was. It seemed that Chung, devoted to her blind father and willing to sacrifice her life for him, had to die. In her place, a new feminine blossomed, one that could be seen and valued for who she was.

The lotus is a concentration of strong vitality and a crystallization of complete beauty that takes deep root throughout the entire world in earth, water, air, underground, and heaven. Chung, who was born again from a lotus, demonstrates the strong power of life by discovering her true self. Her story shows the birth of a complete woman who is fulfilled with joy and mystery (Ko, 2006).

In the creation myth of Hermopolis, a city in ancient Egypt, the lotus grows in the sea. It was believed that La, a divine child, was born in a calyx when the lotus flower bloomed (Ions, 1991). La, a god who symbolized the power of the sun, opened his eyes and divided day and night. It was believed that the lotus was La's eyes. This tale seems to relate

to the fact that the lotus blooms at sunrise and closes at sunset. The lotus grows in water, which was considered to be the source of prosperity in Egypt. This creation myth describes La, who created all things, as coming from a lotus which was created by Ogdoad. In Egyptian mythology, the Ogdoad (Greek “ογδοάς”, the eightfold) were eight deities which were worshipped in Hermopolis during the period of the Old Kingdom (2686-2134 BC).

3. The lotus as a spiritual or religious symbol

In India, where Hinduism is the majority religion, the lotus is officially recognized as the national flower. According to the Hindu creation myth, the god Vishnu emerged from the first large body of water with a golden lotus which had a thousand petals attached to his navel (Figure 2). Self-born within this lotus flower was the god Brahma who then created all living beings in the world. For this reason, the Indian people regard the lotus as the most sacred flower and decorate themselves with lotus flowers on all special occasions. In India, the lotus is believed to have the greatest creative and vital powers because of its ability to give birth to all creation and because it is clear and clean, despite growing in mud.

Buddhism, which is the religion most deeply involved with the lotus, was founded in India, with its origin in Hinduism. Hinduism considered Buddha to be the ninth incarnation of



Figure 2. Brahma arising from a lotus growing out of Vishnu's navel

(Source of the photo: <http://kr.blog.yahoo.com/br07viceroy/99>)

Vishnu. It is said that a lotus arises from the navel of Vishnu and in Hindu art Brahma is depicted as sitting on the lotus when the flower is blossoming. The Hindus considered that the peak of the lotus is the center of the universe and the stem is connected to the navel of the earth.

In Buddhism, all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are portrayed as meditating by sitting on a lotus. Both Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are said to embody the ecological characteristics of the lotus: the flower does not get dirty in the mud and the leaf does not get wet. This means that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are representative of leaving one's material home for a spiritual home with values such as self-realization, cleanliness, a goal of paradise, illumination, and wisdom (Lee, 2008).

It is believed that the lotus bloomed to celebrate Buddha's birth and all Buddhists are reborn as gods on a lotus in heaven. Buddhist scripture does not only draw parallels with the lotus intellectually but also visualizes it broadly through painting, sculpture and architecture in order to facilitate an emotional connection. Statues of the Buddha show him seated on a lotus. Images of the lotus can be found on most Buddhist-related objects such as the convex tiles on the edge of eaves and patterned tiles, old packing materials, lamps, portraits of Buddha (Figures 3-4). In the modern era, sanctuaries and Buddhist altars are decorated with lotuses, on classic wallpaper for interiors and tiles for exteriors.



Figure 3. Patterns drawn on rafter
(Source of the photo: <http://www.lotuslife.co.kr/html/sub3/02.html?pageNum=3>)



Figure 4. Lotus lamps
(Source of the photo: <http://blog.naver.com/nicebongs?Redirect=Log&logNo=150094621668>)

4. The lotus and chakra

Individuation can be defined as actualizing one's true individuality. The chakras symbolize a path or process (Bittlinger, 2001), which seems similar to the process of individuation. Lotus flowers are used in an emblematic manner for both the process of individuation and the chakras; the lotus flower symbolizes 'the Self' in the process of individuation, and it represents the chakras, which are particular places in the body where vitality is stored. Sometimes the increase of this energy is related to yoga practice. Jung described the chakras as "the system at the spiritual level, and places where consciousness lies from the perineal region to the crown of the head" that are developed deliberately or "the lotus-like centers that lie in various locations of consciousness" (Jung, cited by Bittlinger, 2001).

Having read a book by Bittlinger (2001), where the chakras related to the Hindu Yogis' traditional discipline are explained in connection with the process of individuation, I intend now to examine the symbols represented by the chakras.

The chakra consists of seven chakra processes, and each chakra represents different numbers of lotus petals, colors, and animals, which consequently lead to different symbolic meanings. Moreover, as the processes proceed, changes take place as in the process of individuation.

Muladhara, the Root (first) Chakra, is symbolized by a red lotus flower with four



Figure 5. Chakra centers

(Source of the photos: <http://blog.naver.com/skin3318496/70082963302>)

petals; its center is located in the perineal region. According to Jung, the red chakra represents the world of consciousness and the starting point for the process of individuation with all the unconscious being inactive.

Svadhishana, the Polarity (second) Chakra with six orange-colored petals, encompasses the world of the unconscious along with the world of consciousness (the Root Chakra). It is called the Polarity Chakra because it includes both poles. Jung explained that the second chakra represents all of the characteristics of the unconscious and supplements consciousness. I think that this corresponds to the work of recognizing and facing shadow aspects in the process of individuation.

Manipura, the Solar Plexus (third) Chakra, means 'city of jewels'. It has ten yellow petals and corresponds to the center of fire in the body. The Hindus regard it as the fire of Shiva who destroys all things to create them anew. The Solar Plexus Chakra directly creates energies. In his material for the Vision Seminars, Jung (1976) stated that "fire indicates the center of Manipura, which has curative values because individual and contradictory things blend and melt just as in the concept of the alchemical vessel in which substances mix and melt together" (Jung, 1976, cited by Bittlinger, 2001). In this chakra, contradictory aspects of the Polarity Chakra integrate and accept and admit shadow aspects, which I think is equivalent to the work of withdrawing shadow projections.

Anahata, the Heart (fourth) Chakra, is represented by a green lotus flower with twelve petals. In this chakra, vibrations are not generated by external influences; instead, they are created in the form of 'sacred vibration' from the god. Jung said that the first flash of the Self is created in the Heart Chakra. Therefore, we enter the world of mystery, emerging from the entirely material, superficial world, and new things take place.

Vishuddha, the Throat (fifth) Chakra, is represented by sixteen blue petals, where the circle is inside the female triangle unlike the other chakras. This means the world of the god now lies inside us. This means not only does the worlds of the god and our own join together in the outside world, but also that the world of the god can be found within us, which is very symbolic. I understand this to mean that what I experience in the outside world is within myself and extremely subjective.

Ajna, the Third Eye (sixth) Chakra, is represented by two navy petals. The symbol of this chakra involves the union of masculine and feminine, in terms of spirit and matter. This chakra is the state which is achieved when the wills of god and man have become one, and here we can be reminded of Jesus, who is sometimes considered to be the archetype of the God-man. It is known that in this chakra, inner vision, teaching, and insight are achieved by using the third eye, and in this state, one can be free, not controlled by the outside.

Sahasrara, the Crown (seventh) Chakra, is symbolized by a thousand purple lotus petals which face downward. Symbolic of the reversed direction of the usual movement of chakra energy, this position of the petals means that, having reached the peak, the energy returns to the root chakra. Regarding this chakra, Jung explained that it is beyond our forms of experience. Sahasrara, the integration of all opposite poles, is 'marriage' between male and female, the earth and the heaven, the god and human, consciousness and the unconscious, and existence and nonexistence. This is represented through Shiva and Shakti.

Looking into each chakra, I reflected on myself once again. Then I realized that the journey of chakra energy is symbolic of the process of individuation. There is no such thing as complete individuation, and we continue to actualize our individuality while living our lives. I think that this applies to chakra as well. Finding the lotus petals used in each chakra, and perceiving the symbolic meanings that vary according to the number and color of the lotus petals, I thought the lotus flower that came to me gave meanings at every moment of the process of my individuation, providing me with significant symbols.

In terms of my personal experience, I would like to focus on the heart chakra and changes that I experienced. Previously I had tried to find happiness through living up to society's demands, for example, by getting a university degree. Through my personal process in sandplay therapy, I realized in fact that my worldly success did not make me happy and left me feeling empty. I was in need of connection with my inner world that I had detached myself from and neglected.

However, through my sandplay process, I came to learn about the part of myself that I had not been aware of as it had been buried in my inner world. I realized that I had been dishonest with myself and that I had lived by mistaking societal expectations for my own

desires and ideals. Now I try to reject what I believe is not for me and to frankly express myself when it comes to what I want. I have come to accept the truth that I can be happy and meet my true self only when I engage myself in what comes from my inner world, instead of being afraid of how others might see and judge me.

Through the lotus flower, I recognized my conscious world and shadow aspects. For example, when I had previously seen others who were feminine and in need of protection by men, I thought they were weak and indecisive, and I did not want to associate with them. I thought that I did not have those qualities. Through the process of writing this symbol paper, I realized that those were my shadow aspects and I had been projecting them onto others.

By experiencing the process of acceptance, I feel that I am now gradually moving forward in search of my true self. I may not be living up to the expectations of my family and society as I still remain unmarried even though I am past the optimal age to marry that they set. In the past, I used to give myself a hard time over this issue and suffer from stress, thinking that I might be doing something wrong. At present, however, I am content with my single status. Yet I expect to eventually meet my true partner with whom I can have a healthy relationship, while in the meantime continuing to do my utmost and appreciating the joy of every single moment of my life.

5. The lotus as a symbol of the self

According to Jung, the Self refers to all spiritual phenomena, including consciousness and the unconscious, with the personality gradually making conscious some of what was previously unconscious (Lee, 2002). Jung said that the Self can appear as many things in people's dreams, including flowers and trees. For instance, the rose often appears for Westerners and the lotus for Asians because these flowers have significant cultural relevance for those groups of people, respectively (Lee, 2002).

Von Franz (1969) described the circle as a symbol of the Self. The circle represents a concentration of spirit at a level that includes a relationship between humanity and nature. A circle refers to the fundamental totality of life, regardless of whether the symbol appears in the context of primitive sun worship, in myth or dream, in mandalas drawn by a Tibetan monk,

or on diagrams of a city or a globular shape studied by an ancient astronomer.

Brahma stared at four castes standing on the petals of a huge lotus. Looking at the four castes was a preparation for setting directions necessary before he performed creative works. There is a similar story about Buddha. A lotus is said to have arisen when he was born. Then he looked at the ten castes inside the lotus (while the lotus revealed eight castes, Buddha could see ten because he looked up and down). Such a symbolic and unique phenomenon revealed that Buddha was intended to be received as a divine revelation. The totality was engraved on his personality and presence (Jung, Henderson, Franz, Jaffe, & Jacobi, 1964).

Jung interpreted each of the mandala-themed drawings which were produced by analysands by comparing them with myths, the Bible, and books on alchemy. He regarded the presentation of a plant in bloom in the center of a circle as a symbol of growth and development. He considered a bud as feminine and a place of birth and was reminded of the Buddha being born from a lotus flower. He used as an example the image of the young Horus, sometimes known as the Egyptian sun god, inside the lotus flower (Lee, 2002).

The lotus has a meaning of spiritual growth coming out from the heart. As a bud, it represents the potential for the soul to achieve godlike perfection. In Egypt, the lotus was seen as the sun emerging gloriously out of primordial darkness, just as the lotus grows out of mud under the water into a mature flower with blooming petals and leaves. In other words, this is a metaphor for creation (Tresidder, 2000).

Thus the lotus's process of growth can be compared to that of the Self. The process of growth from the water and blooming above the water reminds us of the process of moving from the unconscious to consciousness.

III. Conclusion

Although I am still trying to find out all that the lotus flower means to me, writing this paper has allowed me to reflect: Was the appearance of the lotus in my sand picture a message from my unconscious that it was time to find out more about who I am? Going through a difficult time, had I been thinking of myself as weak, dependent, and unworthy? The lotus flower that came to me through this experience seemed to be the self-archetype that

was sent to me by my unconscious in order to reconnect my disconnected mind, for I had tried to be detached from the unconscious by unilaterally sticking to my consciousness only. Had I sacrificed myself for the patriarchy which prevails in my Korean culture?

For me, who had been achievement-oriented and consciousness-oriented in socio-cultural terms, I think the lotus flower meant the birth of a new femininity and symbolized the appearance of a new Self. To conclude, I believe that the lotus flower came to me in order to become the center of my whole personality, helping me to accept change, to strengthen amid pain and confusion, and to move forward in my long journey of individuation.

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