

Understanding the Swastika

Use and abuse of a sacred symbol



Meaning of the Swastika

The swastika (or svastika) has been used for thousands of years since Vedic times, in the Indus Valley civilizations, in ancient Troy and by Native Americans. The word swastika in Sanskrit means “that which brings good luck and well-being”: su means “good” and asti means “is.” It appears in one of the most frequently used mantras of the Rg Veda [1.89.6], the oldest scripture known to man.

The swastika is considered extremely sacred and holy by Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and Zoroastrians and remains very widely used from ancient times to the present day. The symbol is engraved on sacred objects of worship as well as on doorways of temples and homes.

It forms part of religious ceremonies to celebrate weddings, consecrations of new homes, embarking on new ventures or any such auspicious undertaking. It is used to decorate books, vehicles, cash registers in stores and myriad other objects in daily use in many Asian countries, especially India. Because the swastika has been so widely used for so long, it has been interpreted in a variety of ways by practitioners of the Eastern Religions.

Interpretations used by Hindus include:

- A solar symbol, spreading light in all directions;
- The four goals of human Endeavour: the line from bottom left to top right represents the pursuit of Artha [material security] and Kama [desire]. The line from bottom right to top left represents the flow from Dharma [right action] to Moksha [liberation];
- A representation of Lord Ganesha, the Remover of obstacles, the Repository of wisdom; who is invariably invoked at the start of any religious ceremony in the form of OM.

In **Buddhism**, the four arms of the swastika are interpreted to represent the four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha: there is suffering; the origin of suffering is desire; suffering can cease; the eight-fold path is the way out of suffering.

In **Jainism**, the swastika is the primary holy symbol. It is a symbol of the seventh Jina (Saint), the Tirthankara Suparsva. All Jain temples and holy books must contain the swastika and ceremonies typically begin and end with creating a swastika mark several times with rice around the altar. The four segments of the swastika represent the four destinies of living beings: life as a human being; as a celestial being; as a fish, bird or animal; and as living in hell.



Swastika used in a Zoroastrian Ceremony



Symbols, by definition, have power. Examples exist throughout history of symbols misused and abused by those who seek to harm and intimidate. Perhaps no abuse of a symbol is more potent than one associated with genocide.

The Jewish Perspective

For Jews, the Nazi swastika is inextricably linked with the German National Socialist plan to rid the world of the Jewish people. The swastika was not an incidental or occasional image for the Nazis. It was ubiquitous. Hitler first used it as a symbol for his National Socialist Party, but its adoption as the sole National Flag for Nazi Germany in 1935 coincided with the passage of laws which defined Jews as being of “inferior blood” and which began the process of terrorizing them. Jews lost their right to vote, their ability to marry (or, in some cases, employ) “Aryans,” their capacity to work in certain professions, and their access to a long list of public facilities. Their citizenship was revoked, they became demonized, and described in language usually reserved for vermin.

Under the symbol of the swastika, the Nazis not only waged war against the Allies, but also took to heart their other goal—to destroy Jews. The two goals were not equal: at times the Nazis had to decide whether a particular train would take armaments to the front for its soldiers, or Jews to the death camps. They chose the latter as the more important goal.

Approximately six million Jews were killed by the Nazis under the symbol of the swastika. Some of the most enduring images of this genocidal mission are of the murder of Jewish children, whether of youngsters being gassed to death, or being walked into pits holding hands with their families and neighbors, waiting their turn to be shot. The Nazis approached the killing of Jews as not only a glorious mission, but also something akin to sport. Children were viewed as “useless eaters,” and of the 1 million Jewish children in Poland in 1939, only 5,000 survived. To Jews, the swastika is synonymous with the most violent and darkest of hatreds, one which even glorified killing Jewish babies.

The anti-Semitic use of the swastika did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany. For the last six decades many hateful movements – including white supremacist groups which define non-whites as non-human and Jews as the offspring of Satan – have adopted it. When Jewish graves are desecrated or houses of worship attacked, spray-painted swastikas are frequently found and some anti-Israel activists are now using it to demonize Israel by claiming it is like Nazi Germany. In the Jewish experience, there is no more devastating and hurtful symbol than the swastika.



“The Svastika is an ancient and greatly auspicious symbol of the Hindu tradition. It is inscribed on Hindu temples, ritual altars, entrances, and even account books. A distorted version of this sacred symbol was misappropriated by the Third Reich in Germany, and abused as an emblem under which heinous crimes were perpetrated against humanity, particularly the Jewish people. The participants recognize that this symbol is, and has been sacred to Hindus for millennia, long before its misappropriation.”

—Declaration of the Second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit, February 2008, Jerusalem

This publication is designed to explain briefly the positive meaning and significance of the swastika for Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and Zoroastrians and the painful significance of the swastika for the Jewish community.

The Nazis desecrated this sacred symbol. In Europe and America, the swastika became a symbol of hate and genocide against the Jews—a symbol that is scrawled on walls by racists and anti-Semites. But for billions of the world’s population in India, China, Korea, Indonesia, Tibet, Thailand, and indeed in most of Asia, the swastika has remained a most sacred symbol that has for millennia signified goodness and well-being in both religious and social contexts.

As the world shrinks with globalization, people travel, migrate and mingle more than ever before. We can no longer ignore such widely differing interpretations of a symbol that is as widely used as the swastika.

Issued by:



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of Metropolitan Washington**
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