Color Symbolism in Buddhist Art

There exists in Buddhism the concept of a rainbow body. The “rainbow body” is the penultimate transitional state of meditation in which matter begins to be transformed into pure light. The rainbow body signifies the awakening of the inner self to the complete reservoir of terrestrial knowledge that it is possible to access before stepping over the threshold to the state of Nirvana.

The enumeration of the colors may change but the number remains five. Thus the five transcendental Buddhas, personification of the abstract aspects of Buddhahood, are each endowed with a different color in their sadhanas:

1. Vairochana - White bodied
2. Ratnasambhava - Yellow bodied
3. Akshobhya - Blue bodied
4. Amitabha - Red bodied
5. Amoghasiddhi - Green bodied

It is relevant to note that each of these five Buddhas and their associated colors are said to further the transformative process whereby specific human delusions are changed to positive qualities. Specifically it is believed that by meditating on the individual colors, which contain their respective essences, the following metamorphosis can be achieved:

- White transforms the delusion of ignorance into the wisdom of reality
- Yellow transforms pride into wisdom of sameness
- Blue transforms anger into mirror like wisdom
- Red transforms the delusion of attachment into the wisdom of discernment
- Green transforms jealousy into the wisdom of accomplishment

Further investigation into the five colors takes us to the Mahavairochana-Sutra, which states that a mandala, the quintessential symbol of Tibetan Buddhism should be painted in five colors. It further prescribes that one should start at the interior of the mandala with white and to be followed by red, yellow, blue and black.

The Chakrasambhara-tantra prescribes that the walls of a mandala should be painted in five colors and should maintain the order of black in the interior followed by white, yellow, red and green. In certain mandalas, the four directions within the palace are indicated by different colors. The east is indicated by white, west by red, north by green and the south by yellow while the center is painted blue.

The Kalachakra-tantra, however, prescribes a completely different color scheme to indicate different directions: the color black indicates east, yellow west, white north, and red stands for the south. Whatever the color association with directions, the protecting circle of a mandala is usually always drawn in red.

The four elements air, fire, water and earth are also identified in the Kalachakra-tantra with four different colors: blue (or black), red, white and yellow, respectively. These four elements are further depicted as semi-circular, triangular, circular, and square respectively. This is a precursor to Tantric imagery where color and geometry (not mutually exclusive) are the basic building blocks making up the whole edifice of Tantric symbolism.
Even though the context may vary, Buddhism identifies the significance of a few principal colors with their import being propounded in a variety of circumstances.

**White:**
White occurs when the whole spectrum of light is seen together or when red, yellow and blue colors are mixed. Everything is present in white; nothing is hidden, secret or undifferentiated. White color is thought to have a very cold quality, as in snow, or an extremely hot quality, such as a burning metal. Either can be life threatening and can remind us of death and the end of things. White is a color that both incorporates, and sets things apart from the rainbow spectrum of everyday life.

**Black:**
Black signifies the primordial darkness. Black paintings, a relatively late appearance in Buddhist art, have added yet another means by which artists can conjure up visions of mysterious transcendent worlds. Like the fierce deities who are often the subject matter of these thangkas, the blackness signifies the darkness of hate and ignorance as well as the role these qualities have to play in the awakening of clarity and truth. Black is the color of hate, transmuted by the alchemy of wisdom into compassion. Darkness represents the imminence of the absolute, the threshold of the experience.

**Blue:**
In Buddhism both light (sky blue) and dark aspects of this mysterious color are important. The significance of the light shade is reflected in the supremacy of the semi-precious stone turquoise in the daily spiritual and religious life of the devout Buddhist, who holds various beliefs about this stone. When worn in a ring, it is believed to assure a safe journey; worn in the ear it prevents reincarnation as a donkey; when found, it brings the best of luck and gives new life.

**Red:**
Red is the color of powerful rituals and deeds. It is the color of passion, transmuted to discriminating wisdom. Another dimension regarding the color red is the belief surrounding coral; coral teaches us form, also flow and flexibility within form. It is one of the five sacred stones of the Tibetan Buddhists, and symbolizes the energy of life force. It is often believed to be a protection against the evil eye. In Buddhism coral is believed to be generally good, and believe that the person who wears coral will have success in life. The color red is auspicious in Tibetan culture. It is a sacred color, one of the colors of the five Buddhas and the color of the monk’s garments. It is believed to have protective qualities and is therefore often used to paint sacred buildings.

**Yellow:**
Yellow is the color closest to daylight. It has the highest symbolic value in Buddhism through its link with the saffron robes of monks. This color, previously worn by criminals, was chosen by Gautam Buddha as a symbol of his humility and separation from materialist society. It thus signifies renunciation, desirelessness, and humility. It is the color of earth, thus a symbol of rootedness and the equanimity of the earth.

**Green:**
Green is in the middle of the visible, seven-color spectrum and thus epitomizes the qualities of balance and harmony. It is the color we relate to in nature, trees and plants. Green also denotes youthful vigor and activity. Green in Buddhist thought is the color of action.