

THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF BUDDHIST STŪPA AND ITS RELIGIOUS PURPOSE: A BRIEF REVIEW

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Introduction

The word 'Stūpa' is said to have been derived from the Sanskrit root 'Stu' which refers to 'to worship'. "Thūpa" which literally means "heap" is a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing Buddhist relics. According to Furgoson, 117 years before in India, there had been Vedic Stūpas and the origin of those Stūpas was connected with cemetery. The term used was "Smashanā" and there existed two types of Smashanā, one square in shape and other was circular. In a Stūpa inside the matrix there had been a square shaped place to enshrine relics. Moreover Agravala has given an idea of a Hiraniya Stūpa, a symbol of Vedic Brahman.

The Origin of Stūpa

The origin of Stūpa dates back to 2000 B.C. They originated as pre-Buddhist earthen burial mounds in which ascetics were buried in seated position. During the lifetime of the Buddha, the Sākyans also made Stūpa with ashes kept inside. It is accepted that the Buddha is said to have folded one of His robes into a square and placed His begging bowl and umbrella on it outlining the basic shape of Stūpa when Tapassu and Balluka, the two merchants requested for an object for veneration and inquired how it should be enshrined. The Buddha is said to have given them a lock of His pure blue-black hair (sacred hair relics) to be enshrined. The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta reveals that the Buddha visited with Ven. Ānandathe shrines erected for the previous Buddhas.

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Regional Names Used for Stūpa

Regional names for Stūpa encompass Chaitya (Nepal), Cetiya (Pāli), Dāgaba (Sinhala), Dhātu-garbha in Sanskrit meaning relic-chamber, Chedi (Thai), Candi (Indonesia and Malaysia), Chorten (Tibet and Ladakh (India), Chedey (Cambodia), Ta (Chinese), Tap (Korea), Tháp (Vietnam), Sotoba (Japan), Zedi (Myanmar), Pagoda (South East Asia) etc.

Erection of Stūpas and Enshrinement of Relics

During the life time of the Buddha, Stūpas were constructed enshrining the ashes of Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Moggallāna Therās. When Ven. Ānanda inquired the Buddha how he should treat the Buddha's Body after His great demise, the Buddha had advised him to do all the necessary activities as in the case of a wheel-turning monarch (*cakkavattirāja*). Astūpa at cross-roads should be constructed. This Stūpa in the middle of a four cross road should be circumnated in veneration and flowers should be offered to the Stūpa. According to Mahāsāṅgika Vinaya, the Buddha Himself had constructed a Stūpa for the Kassapa Buddha. It is said according to Sarvastivāda Vinaya that Anāthapiṇḍika, having obtained Buddha's Hair and Nails, constructed a Stūpa.

After the Great Demise of the Buddha, His ash and bone relics were distributed to eight different kingdoms and enshrined in eight Stūpas there. The kings and Brahmins who obtained relics for the construction of stupās were king Ajāsatta of Rajagaha, Sākyans of Kapilavatthu, Bullis of Allakappa, Mallas of Kusinārā and Pāvā, Licchavis of Vesāli, Koliyans of Rāmagrāma, Brahmin of Vetadipa (6th B.C.). In the 3rd Century B.C. Emperor Asoka ordered these eight Stūpas to be opened, further distributed the relics of the Buddha into 84,000 portions, and got Stūpas built over them all over the Buddhist world and thus, a portion of this relics is said to have been enshrined in the Great Stūpa at Sānchi.

The Suitable Sainly Dignitaries and Sacred Relics

According to the Buddhist tradition, four saintly persons who deserve the construction of a Stūpa in veneration are the Fully Enlightened One (the

Buddha), the Enlightened One for Himself (*pacceka Buddha*), Arahant (*arahattaBuddha*) and a Wheel Rolling Monarch (*cakkavattirāja*). The Buddha's bodily relics (*sāririkadhātu*), the objects associated with the Buddha (*pāribhogikadhātu*) and relics sacred to Buddhism (*udesikadhātu*) are enshrined in the Stūpas. The term Stūpa have also been given to four sacred places such as the place where the Bodhisatta was born, the place where He attained Enlightenment, the place where He made the first preaching of Dhamma and the place where the Buddha attained His great demise.

Early Stūpa in Sri Lanka

According to the Mahāvamsa, Girihaduseya enshrined with Hair Relics by Thapassu and Bhalluka (6th B.C.), Mahiyangana Stūpa by God Sumana Saman (6th B.C.), NāgadīpaStūpa enshrined with the Jewel Throne by Culodara and Mahodara (6th B.C.), Kelanicetiya enshrined with the Jewel Throne by king Maniakkhika and Mutiyangana Stūpa built by God Indra are the first Stūpas in Sri Lanka. Thuparāma enshrined with the sacred Right Collar Bone was built by King Devanampiyatissa in the 3rd B.C. A Stūpa in Ambastala enshrined with the ash of Arahant Mahaida built by King Utthiya (3rd B.C.) were constructed. The tradition of building Stūpas was developed under the patronage of Sinhalese kings in the golden age of Anurādhapura in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. and the subsequent revival during the 11th and 12th centuries.

Categorization of Stūpa

Categorization of Stūpas has been done according to their purposes and major shape. Stūpas built for the Fully Enlightened Buddha (*sammāsambuddha*) is of five categories according to relics enshrined in Stūpa. (1) Relic Stūpa in which the relics of the Buddha are enshrined, (2) Object Stūpa in which the objects such as a begging bowl or robe that belonged to the Buddha or important Buddhist scriptures are interred, (3) Commemorative Stūpa erected to commemorate the events in the

lives of the Buddha, (4) Symbolic Stūpa to symbolize aspects of Buddhist theology, for example, Borobuddur is considered to be the symbol of the Three Worlds (*dhātu*) and the spiritual stages (*bhūmi*) in a Mahāyānabodhisattva's character and (5) Votive Stūpas built to commemorate visits and to gain spiritual benefits. According to the size of Stūpa, three categories like (1) Gigantic Stūpas (Ruvanveliseya, Jetavanaya), (2) Medium size Stūpa (Ambastala Stūpa, Mirisavatiya) and (3) Small Stūpa (Thuparāmaya, Lankarāmaya) can be introduced. Stūpa, according to the shape of its hemispherical matrix can be categorized into six major shapes such as (1) Dhānyākāra (Heap of paddy shape – Kelaniya Stūpa), (2) Bubbulākāra (Bubble shape – Ruwanweliseya), (3) Ghantākāra (Bell shape – Mahiyāngana Stupa), (4) Ghaṭākāra (Pot shape – Kirivehera Kataragama), (5) Padmākāra (Lotus shape – Demalamahāseya) and (6) Amalākāra (Myrobalan shape). The other shapes are (7) Palandākāra (Onion Shaped– Nedigampala Stupa), (8) Aṇḍākāra (Egg Shaped – a casket at Ruvanveliseya), (9) Pagoda Type Stūpa – Satmahal Prāsāda of Polonnaruva, (10) Silindākāra (Cylinder Shaped – Kudumbigala Stūpa at Ampara), (11) Astakāra (Octagonal shape – a Stūpa PācinnatissapabbataVihāra), (12) Catrasrakāra (square shape) and (13) Padmākāra -Amalākāra (Lotus –Myrobalan – a Stūpa at Warakapola)

Religious Symbolism of the Buddhist Stūpa

The interpretation of the salient structures of Stūpa symbolizing various Buddhist concepts related to Buddhist teachings is controversial. The Foundation of Stūpa symbolizes cycle of re-births (*saṃsara*), the Tree terraces depict the Triple Gem, the Matrix is symbolical of 37 Dhamma or 84000 doctrinal matters, the Square Enclosure is an illustration of the Fourfold Assembly or the Four Noble Truths, the Section of Deities is depictive of heavenly world, the Spire is an expression of the Four Paths and the Four Fruits, the Pinnacle is an indication of the two types of *Nibbāna* (*sopadisesa* and *anupadisesa*) and

the Crest Jewel of Stūpa is a symbolization of *summumbonum* of Buddhism (*Nibbāna*).

Conclusion

Buddhist Stūpa, which developed as a religious monument enshrined with the sacred relics of the Buddha and important saintly figures, is considered to be the most significant type of Buddhist architectural structure, the nucleus of Buddhist faith and worship. Most Stūpas have a very distinctive semi-spherical shape. As Buddhism was introduced in different regions, the basic architectural features of Stūpas were transformed into a variety of shapes reflecting the artistic expressions of those cultures and religious interpretations according to different Buddhist traditions. The visual and psychological purpose of constructing Stūpas has ever been the symbolical commemoration, veneration, aestheticism, merit concept, immense inner calming influence on the restless minds and hearts of the oppressed masses in the world.

Keywords: Buddhism, architecture, symbolism, Stūpa

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