

WHAT SYMBOLIC ASPECTS COULD BE GLIMPSED FROM THE BUDDHIST STŪPA IN SRI LANKA?

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Introduction

Sociology of religious study states that beliefs, symbols, and rituals are major components of all religions, and that they are the primary “*building blocks*” of religious institutions. (International Encyclopaedia of Sociology- Volume Two, Editor, Franken. Magill- p, 1094) this is true when we talk about the Buddhist Art & Architecture. The perfect proportion of the Buddha’s body corresponds to the design of religious monuments. Stūpa houses sacred relics of the Buddha. Stūpas are venerated by the Buddhists and their imposing. Buddhists have always had a high regard for relics associated with enlightened persons. This study is generally based on the symbolic aspects of the Buddhist Stūpa in Sri Lanka. It is very clear that Sri Lanka has been an agricultural country since past. Probably, we can come across that the agricultural aspects are symbolized through the Buddhist Stūpa (*shape of paddy-heap Stūpa*). Most of the Buddhist cultural and philosophical aspects can be unearthed from the Stūpa. Stūpa is one of the strongest symbols that consist of the gradual path of attaining the Buddhist final goal, *Nibbāna*. From bottom to top of the Stūpa has its own symbolization. These relics are powerful symbols for representing and remembering the marvellous attributes of the Buddha.

Research Methodology

The data for this study has been collected from the primary Buddhists sources and the relevant monographs and in field of Buddhist Art and Architecture.

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Discussion

Briefly from Sanskrit: Stūpa (the root Stūpa), Pāli: Thūpa(the root *chi*), literally meaning *heap* is a mound or tumuli-like structure containing Buddhist relics, typically the remains of a Buddha or saint, used by Buddhists as a place of worship. In the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta* of the Dīgha Nikāya, the Buddha authorized the erection of Stūpas to enshrine his remains after his demise. Furthermore, the Buddha mentioned that for the following four persons worthy of being honoured after their demise by the erection of Stūpas.

1. A fully Enlightened Buddha
2. A Pacceka Buddha
3. An Enlightened Disciple of the Buddha
4. A Wheel-Turning Monarch

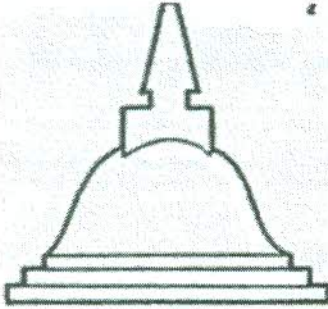
The Stūpa is a solid hemispherical dome in which the Buddha's relics are enshrined. *Senarat Paranavitane* says: "we can conclude that the form of the oldest Sinhalese Stūpas was the same as that of the monument of Sāñchi, the oldest remaining example of this type of edifice in India." (*Parnavitana*, S. Sinhalayo, p. 14) The Stūpa, as structural form has been in existence for a long time. When the art of Stūpa architecture was expanded to lands outside India, it developed along lines peculiar to each country and period, being influenced by the artistic traditions of the people and their rituals of veneration. In Sri Lanka, for example, the earliest Stūpas were similar to the Indian samples but later styles evolved into a variety of shapes. Stūpas were built in Sri Lanka soon after King *Devanampiyatissa* embraced Buddhism; the first Stūpa to be built was the *Thūpārāmaya*. Later on Sri Lanka went on to build many Stūpas over the years, some like the *Jetavanārāma*, the *Ruwanmeliya*, the *Abhayagiriya* in Anuradhapura being one of the tallest and biggest ancient structures in the world. *The Vaijyanta*, a book founded by *Henry Parker* mentions of the six shapes of the Sri Lankan Stūpas.

- I. Bell Shape
- II. Pot Shape



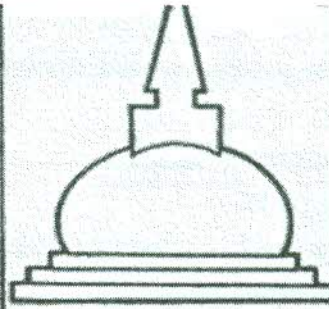
- III. Bubble Shape
- IV. Shape of Paddy-heap
- V. Lotus Shape
- VI. Nelli Fruit or (Myrobalan)Shape

(I) Bell Shape



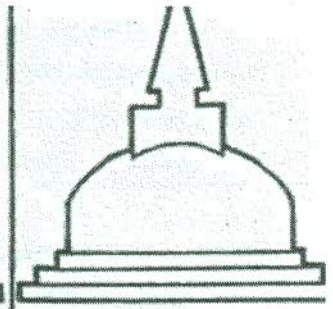
(Communication of Dhamma)

(II) Pot Shape



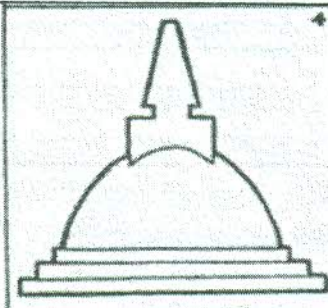
(Impermanence)

(III) Bubble Shape



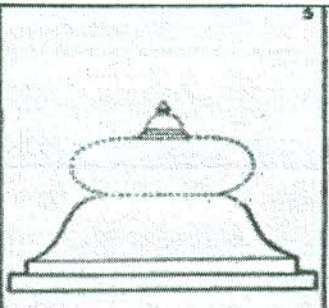
(Impermanence)

(IV) Heap of Paddy Shape



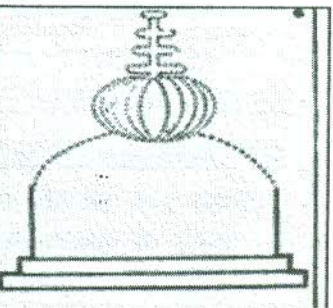
(Simplicity & Non Violence)

(V) Nelli Fruit Shape



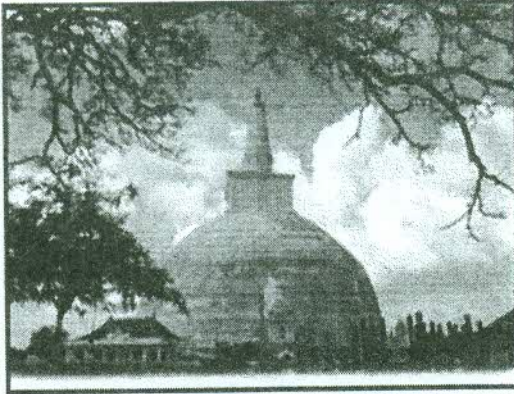
(Right Vision)

(VI) Lotus Shape

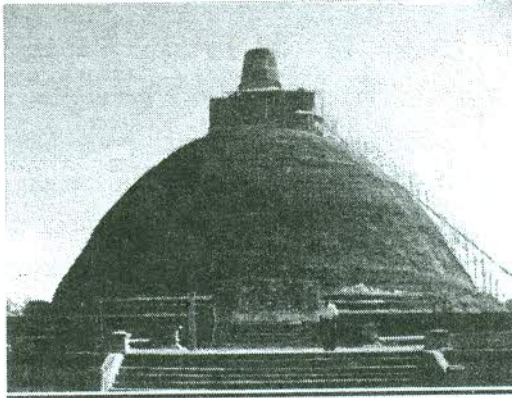


(Purity)

Bubbulākāra (Bubble-shaped)



Dhānyākāra(Heap of Paddy-shaped)



Ghanthākāra(Bell-shaped)



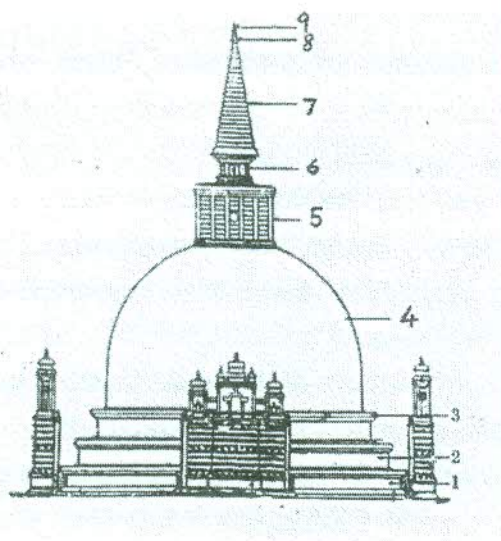
Ghatākāra(Pot-shaped)





All these shapes of Sri Lankan Stūpas denote their own representations in the Buddhist teachings. What are the main components of the Stūpa? The followings can be considered as the main components of the Stūpa. They also signify for the profound Buddhist teachings.

- I. Basal ring
- II. Basal ring
- III. Basal ring
- IV. Dome
- V. Square (Chamber, Hallow)
- VI. Cylinder
- VII. Spire
- VIII. Minaret
- IX. Crystal



- I. Foundation - 84, 000 Dhamma Units, Conviction (saddhā)
- II. Three Basal rings - Triple Gems
- III. Dome- 37 factors of Enlightenment, Cosmology, Universality, Concept of Great Man
- IV. Square (Chamber, Hallow) - The Four Noble Truth
- V. Cylinder- Six fold Divine Worlds
- VI. Minaret - Nine fold Teachings of the Buddha (navangasatthusāsana)
- VII. Swan- Purity
- VIII. Lotus- Purity
- IX. The Sun & Moon- Last long of the Dhamma
- X. Decorative motif - Lust
- XI. Four Entrances- Four Kinds of Gods, Openness of the Dhamma for all)
- XII. Elephant Wall- (Patience, Buddhist Path of Liberation)
- XIII. Crystal- Nibbāna

Conclusion

Sri Lanka possesses construction of Stūpas, which have used most advanced engineering techniques and knowledge. Buddhist Stūpa is not a tomb, but a memorial which symbolizes the supremacy of the Buddha and his Dhamma, or teachings. For the Buddhists, Stūpa gives one a feeling of *immovability, potency, nobility, and magnificence*. Thus, we can, safely, conclude that Sri Lankan Buddhist Stūpa conveys Buddhist philosophical doctrines and cultural aspects.

(Kimte Vakkalīmināpūtikāyenadiṭṭhena? Yodhammapassati so mappassati. Yomappassati so dhammapassati)

(Vakkali, What good does it bring to you, by looking at this physical body of filth? One, who sees the Dhamma, sees me. One, who sees me, sees the Dhamma. (The Samyutta Nikāya III, **The Vakkali Sutta**)

Keywords: Sri Lankan Buddhist culture, Stūpa, various components, Shapes, symbolism

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