

## MAIN PARTS OF A STŪPA AND ITS SYMBOLISM

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### Introduction and Discussion

Etymology

Stūpa >Thūpa >Tur̄mba> Tuba

Caitya> Cētiya>Ceta> Sēya>Vehera

DhātuGarbha>Dhātugabba>Dāgeba

### The Origin of Stūpa and Evolution

The origin of Stūpa goes back to the beginning of human civilization. It means Stūpa has a long history. The origin of Stūpa took place based on religious beliefs and as a ritual for respecting the dead. Stūpa at Ituskan in Rome, Siggurat in Sumenia and Babilonia and Pyramids in Egypt are some of the examples. In Sri Lanka, Megalithic burial tradition also proves some tradition. It can be believed that Stūpas which began and spread even at the pre-Buddhist era and at the time of the Buddha have originated with the purpose of offering the dead as rituals.

When the Buddha was living, various Stūpas were erected with the recommendation of the Buddha. The Buddha himself advised to build a Stūpa enshrining the ashes or remains of the Two Great Disciples. The Stūpa, which was built by Tapassu and Balluka at Tiriya in Sri Lanka with the bodily relics of the Buddha, and the Stūpa at Mahiyangana were erected at the time of the Buddha. When the Buddha was proceeding to Kusināra (Kusinagar in India), the Buddha has preached to Ven. Ananda that the

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Stūpas Cāpala, Sarandada, Gōtamaka, Bahuputtaka and Sattambaka are attractive.

At the same time, the Buddha has preached in Parinibbāna Sutta about four types of persons that are suitable for erecting Stūpas as, "Cattāro me bhikkawe tūpārahopuggalosammasambuddha, paccēka Buddha, arahattasavakā, cakkavattirājā". After the passing way of the Buddha, it is said that ten Stūpas including Angāraka Cetiya have been built enshrining the bodily relics of the Buddha. Ancient Stūpas which are in Sānci, Bhāru, and Amarāvati traditions can be seen in India. In Sri Lanka, there are royals like Uttiya, Dutugamunu, Walagambā, Mahasen, Parākramabahu the Great, QueenRupavati who built huge Stūpas. Also, at present, Sandahirusēya, which is being built with the leadership of His Excellency Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the President of Sri Lanka, includes to the list of great Stūpas of Sri Lanka marking another milestone in the Sri Lankan history.

### **Main Features of a Stūpa**

The part below the ground is the foundation of a Stūpa. The foundation should be so strong for preventing the Stūpa from sinking. The terrace below the matrix is known as the three pedestals. It is said that the three pedestals, termed Mēdhi, Pupphadāna, Pradakshinā Vēdikā and Mal Piyavasā, were built to offer flowers. Sometimes, the three pedestals have been adorned with various designs.

The most important part of a Stūpa is the matrix or the relic chamber. It starts with the highest one of the three pedestals. Not only relics but also many sacred things and valuable articles are enshrined in the matrix. According to the design of the matrix, Stūpas are categorized into eight types

(i.e. Bubbulākāra, Dhānyākāra, Ghantākāra, Padmākāra, Āmlākāra, Caturashrākāra and Ashtākāra)

Above the matrix is the Square. It has been termed as Harmika, Kuda Mandapa, Sivkon Sēya, Sivkon Kotuva, and Biso Katuva. It has been decorated with the carvings of Sun and Moon, decorative motifs and the images of swans.

The part in the shape of a cylinder above the square is the section of deities (Dēvatakotuva). The part which gradually becomes smaller with rings starting from the section of the deities is the spire. In the ancient time, this was termed as the series of parasols. Above the spire is the pinnacle. In the ancient time, the single parasol became the pinnacle. Later, placing a gem on the pinnacle took place. It is known as the jewel crest.

### **The Symbolism of Stūpa**

SalapatalaMaluwa (the ground with stones) symbolizes all beings.

The foundation of a Stūpa symbolizes defilements.

The three pedestals symbolize the Triple Gem.

The matrix symbolizes 84,000 Dhammas and 37 doctrine for Buddhahood.

The square symbolizes the Four Noble Truths.

The section of deities symbolizes six heavens and Brahmin worlds.

The spire symbolizes the Noble Eightfold Path.

The pinnacle symbolizes the Noble attainments.

The jewel crest symbolizes Nirvāna.

Saddharmapundareeka and Lalitavistara of Mahayanic tradition has described that the Stūpa is a symbol of the doctrine of the Buddha. CaityaVibhāgaVinayodbahvaSutta of Mahāngikas has compared 17 parts of the Stūpa with the doctrinal matters of the Buddha, 24 parts of Stūpa are presented in VibhāgaLakshanaKārikāVivecanaSutta, 25 parts of Stūpa are connected with the doctrinal matters of the Buddha in KriyāSangraha. Some

have intended the Stūpa symbolizes the entire universe by including the Yūpa Yastiya into Stūpa.

### **Methodology**

By examining various ideologies of academics, a very short description about the origin of Stūpa and evolution has been included here with the purpose of discussing symbolism of Stūpa. Such a method was followed in order to start the discussion and approach the topic in the proper order. Not only scholars in Thēravāda tradition but also Mahāyānic scholars have presented a symbolism pertaining to Stūpa. Therefore, the methodology of the research is to compare those ideologies with later critics paying special attention to symbolism of Stūpa.

### **Purpose of the Study**

It can be seen from the beginning of Stūpa that various symbols have been presented even through the etymology of the word Stūpa. In both traditions, Thēravāda and Mahāyāna, there are various viewpoints about symbolism of Stūpa. So, at a time when there is a discussion about Stūpa, the main purpose of the study is to give a brief introduction about the traditional symbolism of Stūpa.

### **Importance of the Study**

Various scholars have expressed their views regarding the symbolism of Stūpa on various occasions. The tradition Thēravāda about the Buddhist Stūpa and the ideas of Mahayana tradition vary. To analyse all those opinions will be a tedious task for the researcher. Presenting all those opinion in a nutshell in this manner will be very beneficial for the future scholars.

## **Conclusion**

It is obvious that there have been considerable symbols pertaining to the Stūpa. Though there are various symbolisms in various traditions, it seems that common feature is to present doctrinal interpretations for various parts of the Stūpa. Finally, the Stūpa symbolizes the deliverance as a whole gaining through various doctrinal matters.

**Keywords:** Stūpa, Buddha, parts of Stūpa, symbolism

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