

**Athens Institute for Education and Research**

**ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

**ARC2014-1094**

**Stupa, Pagoda and Chorten –  
Origin and Meaning of Buddhist  
Architecture**

**Wah Sang Wong**

**Associate Professor**

**The University of Hong Kong**

**Hong Kong**

An Introduction to  
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Wong, W.S., (2014) "Stupa, Pagoda and Chorten – Origin and Meaning of Buddhist Architecture", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: ARC2014-1094.**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr  
URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)

URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN: **2241-2891**

31/07/2014

## **Stupa, Pagoda and Chorten – Origin and Meaning of Buddhist Architecture**

**Wah Sang Wong**  
**Associate Professor**  
**The University of Hong Kong**  
**Hong Kong**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the Indian Stupa, the Han Pagoda and the Tibetan Chorten, all three being an important typology of Buddhist Architecture. The Stupa in India first built in the second century BCE to house the Buddha's relics was later used as symbolic or commemorative purposes. Then Buddhism which started in India reached China at the Han Dynasty (67CE). Together with the literature of teachings came the need for architecture to receive the holy relics as well as to establish educational institutions for Buddhism. So this is the beginning of Buddhist architecture in China.

With the fusion of Buddhism and the Han culture and technology, pagodas were built. These buildings find their shapes and sizes in great variety as they appeared in different places. How these forms relate to the philosophy of Buddhism will be discussed.

On the other hand, Buddhism was disseminated directly into Tibet in the seventh century. Indian Stupas were also transformed through local culture and technology into Tibetan Chorten. These can be placed within temples or individually.

This article will explore the names, the origin and different symbolic meanings of these Stupa, Pagoda and Chorten in the context of the philosophy of Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Stupa, Pagoda, Chorten, Garbha, Tathagatagarbha, Buddha Mind

## Introduction of Names

The stupa is a construction in the form of hemisphere or mound used to contain Buddha's relics or ashes of Buddhist monks and thus for memorial services<sup>1</sup>.

Though carrying similar functions, the stupa assumes different architectural forms and takes on regional names when it was spread across various location of Asia (Wikipedia, online). The Sanskrit *stupa* was transliterated to China as *Ta* (塔) otherwise known as pagoda<sup>2</sup>. Based on the Chinese *ta*, there were the designations of Korean *tap* and Vietnam *thap*. The Japanese *tō* originated from Chinese and the alternative *sotoba* was based on the original Sanskrit *stupa*. The Nepalese *chaitya* took a more direct transmission from the ancient Sanskrit *caitya* which include any holy religious entity such as temple or stupa. Similarly, *candi* in Indonesia and Malaysia implies religious buildings besides stupa. The Tibetan *chorten*<sup>3</sup> was however named from the meaning of "basis of offering" (Wylie: *mchod rten*). There are also other names from countries like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Mongolia, Thailand and Russia etc.

Besides the variety of appearances and names, the stupa has indeed Buddhist symbolic meaning and cultural significance. This is discussed in the following.

## Stupa and the Meaning of Garbha

Originated as a pre-Buddhist burial mound, the Stupa is a special structure developed in early Indian Buddhism alongside with architectural typologies (Phuoc, 2010, 1) such as the Ashoka pillar, monasteries, caves and temples. As the first building construction in Buddhism, its origin and meaning are worthy of research studies.

### *The Origin of the Stupa*

The Buddha in the Mahaparinibbanasutta told his disciple that his body after his death should be cremated and the relics distributed with stupas constructed upon them.

An account of the Buddha's burial was recorded by the fourteenth century Buddhist scholar and master, Buton<sup>4</sup>, in his History of Buddhism (Stein, 2013).

---

<sup>1</sup>Le Huu Phuoc classified the stupa in five forms according to their forms and forms which are relic stupa, object stupa, commemorate stupa, symbolic stupa and votive stupa. Reference : "Buddhist Architecture" by Phuoc.

<sup>2</sup>The term pagoda came from Persian *butkada* (*but* as idol and *kada* as dwelling) or the Sanskrit *bhagavati*, the Buddha mother. Pagodas were usually buildings and could be multistoried that one could enter.

<sup>3</sup>The term *Chorten* was also used by Ladakh of India and Bhutan.

<sup>4</sup>Buton (1290-1364) was one of the great masters of Tibetan Buddhism with the highest scholarship and expertise in meditation practices.

More than 2500 years ago, after the passing way of the Buddha in Kushinagar, his body was cremated and the ashes were treated as holy relics<sup>1</sup>. People from the clan of Papaka came to Kushinagar and said, “*This Teacher has been beloved to us for a long time. Since he passed away near your village, you must give us an appropriate share of the relics of his remains. We will build a stupa at Papaka where we can worship and hold memorial services.*” Similarly, the clans of Puluka, Vaishnavadvipa, Kapilavastu, Vaishali, Madadha and Krodhavas etc requested for their share. Subsequently, there were fourteen portions of the relics including four of the Buddha’s teeth. The clans each constructed stupas in their own countries allowing the relics to be worshipped. However, twenty years later, King Ajatastru opened up eight stupas and collected the relics into one single stupa southeast of Rajagriha. Anyway, the original stupas were all lost or unidentifiable.

About two or three centuries passed with the quiet period<sup>2</sup> of early Buddhism, the great Mauryan King Ashoka<sup>3</sup> revived Buddhism and built many stupas to house relics of the Buddha and his significant disciples as well as to mark the location of important events of the Buddha’s life. For instance, the location of the first sermon of the Buddha at deer park (*Rishipattana*) was marked by the Dhamek Stupa built in 249 BCE at Sarnath, India, by King Ashoka. This stupa is the oldest one in existence. It was said that he commissioned 84,000 stupas all over India.

#### *Architectural Typology of the Stupa*

The Stupa at Sanchi (fig.1), Madhya Pradesh, in central India represents the mature development of the architecture of stupa. Previously stone and mud brick construction, the Sanchi stupa is a whole stone construction built with all the necessary components (Phuoc, 2010, 2). On the flattened summit is the *hamika* (a box-like structure) and *yasti-chattra* (an umbrella). The great hemisphere (about 100 feet in diameter) is the *anda* and the circular base is the *medhi*. The fence wall on the ground surrounding the structure is the *vedika* defining the procession path. The ornate gateways (decorated with reliefs) at the four cardinal points of the *vedika* are the *toranas* which are stone transformation of timber construction at that time (Hardy, 2007). Ashoka pillars accompanied the gateways.

Many stories of the Buddha could be told from the carvings on the *toranas*, including his mother’s (Queen Maya) dream of giving birth, the birth of the Buddha, Buddha leaving the palace to seek enlightenment, first sermon

---

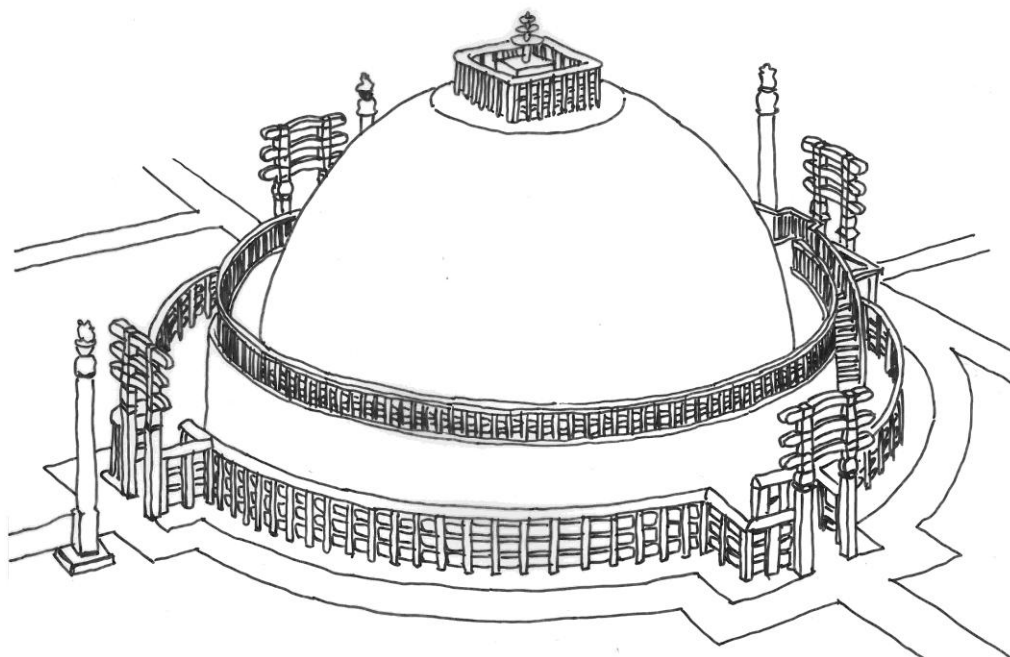
<sup>1</sup>Sylvia Somerville wrote in “Stupas – Symbols of the Enlightened Mind” that the remains of the realized masters after cremation become distilled essence of the awakened mind. The stupa that embodied such became a meeting place for the students and the teacher’s wisdom. ([http://www.stupas.org/art\\_stupas\\_symbols.html](http://www.stupas.org/art_stupas_symbols.html) online)

<sup>2</sup>These were the times for the collection and categorization of teachings of the Buddha with the Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana councils. Refer to “The Development of Buddhism in India”.

<sup>3</sup>Ashoka the Great (304-232BCE) unified most of India and later dedicated to propagate Buddhism so he built a lot of Buddhist monuments to commemorate and mark the events of the Buddha.

of the Buddha, Ashoka's visit to the Bodhi tree, adoration of heavenly gods etc. A good account of the details and stories of the carvings can be found at M.K. Dhavalikar's "Sanchi". Also, the elaborate relief has conserved much knowledge of the architecture at that time such as vernacular houses, shrines, city gates and palaces.

**Figure 1.** *Stupa at Sanchi*



Originally commissioned by Ashoka the Great, the stupa was subsequently reconstructed, enlarged, added with fence and gateways, partly destroyed during colonization and restored to its present appearance. Now this Buddhist monument belongs to the UNESCO World Heritage site (Sanchi, online).

#### *Garbha and the Philosophy of Tathagatagarbha*

The word *stupa* actually means "heap". It is a heap of mass to make the hemispheric structure which is called the *anda* (egg) or *garbha* (womb). With the big heap of mass hiding the Buddha's relics, symbolically this *garbha* is thus a potentiality of the Buddha rather than a memorial of the passing away of the Buddha in this world. It is a sign of life rather than death!

This leads to the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha<sup>1</sup> which is the main theme that Buddha Sakyamuni was teaching at the third turning<sup>2</sup> of the Dharma

<sup>1</sup>*Tathagata* is another designation of the Buddha meaning appearing as it is. This is the reality beyond conceptualization. *Garbha* is the womb of the Buddha.

<sup>2</sup>There were three phases or turnings of the Dharma by the Buddha. The first turning is focus on the Four Noble Truths and Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. The second is mainly on emptiness and prajna wisdom which are alternative approaches to the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha. The third is centered on the meaning and realization of Tathagatagarbha.

(Buddha's teachings). Adrian Snodgrass<sup>1</sup> expressed in the "Symbolism of the Stupa" that the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha revealed "*a conjunctively whole universe*" to effect interdependence of everything that constitute it. Hence, like Zen Buddhism, everyone has the Buddha nature. Not so, even an insect and a seedling has the Buddha nature. This is "*one mind or the mind only*". This can be understood as the mind that is neither identical nor different with the universe. In this explanation, the worldly phenomena (stupa) will be looked upon as having the Buddha nature (relics) inside.

Further meaning can be found in the sutras. In "The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala", Queen Srimala explained to the Buddha on the definition of tathagatagarbha: "*The Dharmakaya<sup>2</sup> of the Tathagata is ....., free from all defilement-store; and accompanied by Buddha natures more numerous than the sands of the Ganges, which are non-discrete, knowing as liberated, and inconceivable. This Dharmakaya of the Tathagata when not free from the store of defilement is referred to as the Tathagatagarbha.*"

The Dharmakaya is the Buddha's wisdom. In this interpretation of the Sutra, the worldly phenomena (stupa) will be regarded as inseparable from the Dharmakaya (the purified essence represented by the hidden relics). Like the mirror reflecting images is inseparable from the images yet the mirror is free from the marks of the images. This is the mental state of Tathagatagarbha. Using this example, we can never see a mirror without reflections. This expresses the inconceivable state of the Dharmakaya as it is an inner self-realization.

#### *Paying Homage to Stupas*

As holy entities, people pay homage to stupas by circumambulating which is walking clockwise around the stupa and reciting prayers to the Buddha. They consider this a blessing it itself that can pacify negative propensities and help others out of their troubles.

Regarding this, Bodhidharma<sup>3</sup> said in the "Breakthrough Sermon<sup>4</sup>" (Red Pine, 1989), "*As for walking around stupas, the stupa is your body and mind. When your awareness circles your body and mind without stopping, this is called walking around a stupa. The sages of long ago followed this path to nirvana. But people today don't understand what this means. Instead of looking inside they insist on looking outside. They use their natural material bodies to walk around material stupas. And they keep at it day and night, wearing themselves out in vain and coming no closer to their real self.*"

Understanding of Buddhism has to begin with the symbolic meaning rather than just materialistic superficial interpretation otherwise the spiritual awakening cannot come forth.

---

<sup>1</sup>Adrian Snodgrass is an international renown authority on Buddhist philosophies and art.

<sup>2</sup>Dharmakaya is the ultimate wisdom, the Buddha's wisdom from his inner self-realization.

<sup>3</sup>Bodhidharma came to China from India in the fifth century and was the first patriarch of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in China.

<sup>4</sup>The Breakthrough Sermon taught that enlightenment should be attained by beholding the mind.

## **Pagoda and Sino Buddhism**

The first temple erected by Emperor Ming Di in 68CE in China to mark the first transmission of Buddhism (Ling, 2004) was the White Horse Monastery (白馬寺) of Luoyang. The White Horse temple was built for storage of the sutras and holy items from India and to provide lodging for monks translating the sutras<sup>1</sup>. It was named after the event for the monks to carry back the Sutras and the first Buddha image on a white horse.

There is little evidence that a pagoda was built together with the original White Temple as the original structures had disappeared for centuries. However, there was a White Horse Pagoda built in 384CE by the great translator, Kumarajiva (鳩摩羅什) in the village of the White Horse Pagoda in memory of his horse but it was in the Tibetan chorten style.

The route from India to China passed through Ghandhara, Central Asia and Turkistan; from these regions arts and technology also met with Han culture. Later Buddhism plus its associated art and culture spread to Vietnam in the first to second centuries CE, Korea in the fourth century CE and Japan sixth century CE.

There were later missions to India including Fa Xian in the fourth to fifth centuries and Xuan Zhuang of the Tang Dynasty. Large quantities of knowledge had been compiled not only for Buddhists, but also historians, geographers and archaeologists.

### *Architectural Typology of the Pagoda 塔*

Evidence<sup>2</sup> shows that multistoried timber structures had appeared in China before two century BCE (before the Qin Dynasty). Le Huu Phuoc in his study of “Buddhist Architecture”(Phuoc, 2010) revealed that multistoried pavilion<sup>3</sup> was constructed in the Three Kingdoms in 190CE for purposes other than Buddhism. A guess may be the watch tower. Hence, the pagoda was not an architectural form directly transformed from the Indian stupa but rather a Chinese typology adapted to be used for Buddhist purposes.

The timber pagoda appeared earlier than the masonry one in Sino architecture. Much destruction had been done in the history of the pagoda so that the oldest timber pagoda remaining in China is now in Shanxi province called the Pagoda of Fugong Temple which was built in the eleventh century CE in Liao style. Yet a well-known example of the ancient masonry pagoda is the Great Goose Pagoda constructed of bricks in 652CE during the Tang Dynasty for the use of Xuan Zhuang (after his travels to India).

By the Chinese tradition, the early planning layout of the monastery was along a central straight axis with the pagoda located directly behind the inner

---

<sup>1</sup>The Indian monks helping the translation were Kasyapa-Matanga and Gobharana. The first translated sutra was the “Sutra of Forty-two Sessions”.

<sup>2</sup>The multistoried timber structures were described in literature and their replica clay models found in burial tombs.

<sup>3</sup>The Chinese word for pagoda, 塔, means tower implying a multistoried building.



gate and in front of the image hall (where the main Buddha statute was kept) and finally the assembly hall for monks. In this plan, the pagoda is the first building encountered in the monastery. Then later in the Sui and early Tang periods (581-907CE), temples added a second pagoda as a pair so that it appeared as a front courtyard when one entered the monastery to face directly with the image hall and the dual pagodas on both sides. Fisher, R.E. wrote in “Buddhist Art and Architecture” (Fisher, 1993) that though the temples returned to the single-pagoda plan after the Tang Dynasty but the pagoda was usually place on one side and did not assume its previous prominence. Also, the Ch’an and Amitabha sects (popular at the Sung dynasty) had much less emphasis upon the holy relics further diminishing the importance of the pagoda.

*Preservation of Chinese Style in Japan*

The oldest timber pagoda is now found in Japan known as the Five Storied Pagoda (Fig. 2) in Horyu-ji<sup>1</sup> of Nara. Built by Prince Shotoku in 607 CE at the first dissemination of Buddhism into the Japanese imperial government, this pagoda belongs now to the UNESCO heritage site. The style of architecture was called the Asuka style in Japan but basically in the Sino style of the Six Dynasties before the Tang. This pagoda was believed to contain the Buddha’s relics.

**Figure 2.** *Five-Storied Pagoda at Horyuji, Nara*



The Shitenno-ji (四天王寺) in Osaka built by Prince Shotoku in 593 AD followed the axial planning with the entrance, then the pagoda, the main hall and the lecture hall at the rear. A detail account was given by Kakichi Suzuki in “Early Buddhist Architecture in Japan”.

---

<sup>1</sup>Commissioned by prince Shotoku, the original name of Horuyji was *Ikaruga-dera* (斑鳩寺) and the wood used in the central pillar of the pagoda was verified to be fell in 594CE. Reference : Wikipedia online <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C5%8Dry%C5%AB-ji>

**Figure 3.** *East Pagoda at Yakushi-ji of Nara*



The Horyu-ji layout did not follow the Sino main axis plan but rather the image hall called the Kondo and the Five Storied Pagoda were located on either side of the front courtyard, making this a special Japanese creation. However, the dual pagodas in Yakushi-ji<sup>1</sup> of Nara reveal the dual-pagoda layout. The east pagoda (Fig. 3) constructed in 730CE is the only original building in this monastery. This pagoda has been praised through its beauty as the “frozen music” by Ernest Fenollosa, an American art historian, because of the rhythmic overhanging eaves and the fine proportion of its form.

#### *Meaning of Pagoda in Feng Shui Principles*

Besides being a Buddhist icon, blending into the Feng Shui<sup>2</sup> Principles of traditional Chinese culture is evident of the prominent pagoda structure. As a vertical high-rise feature, the pagoda was established as a symbol<sup>3</sup> of proficient literacy. When placed in the appropriate location of a village, the feature could enhance students to take examinations for a civil service to become a

---

<sup>1</sup>Yakushi-ji (薬師寺) means Temple of the Medicine Buddha. Reference : Wikipedia online <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakushi-ji>

<sup>2</sup>Feng Shui means Chinese geomancy based on the five elements and *yin-yan* principles.

<sup>3</sup>The symbolic meaning and hence the function of the pagoda can vary. The pagoda had been used as a sword to cut off the *qi* (the energy of nature) flowing in the channels of natural landscape.

government official bringing glory back to the ancestral village. (Chinese pagoda, online)

Also, only odd numbers are noted to be used for the number of tiers or stories for the structure of the pagoda. In Tao<sup>1</sup>, odd numbers belong to the sky which is the vertical dimension and even numbers belong to the earth which is the horizontal dimension. To follow the Tao of natural law, the pagoda is constructed in tiers of 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, etc. Even the tallest building now in Taiwan is called the Taipei 101<sup>2</sup> with 101 as the number of stories above ground.

### **Chorten and the Path to Enlightenment**

The Chorten appeared in Tibet when the teachings of Buddhism were disseminated into Tibet. According to Le Huu Phuoc, the construction of the chorten (Phuoc, 2010, 4) happened at the eighth century CE in the reign of Emperor Trisong Detsen<sup>3</sup> who formally introduced the Buddhist teachings from India and invited to Tibet Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava<sup>4</sup>, who was the first ancestral master of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Samye Monastery, the first Buddhist school in Tibet, was designed and supervised by Padmasambhava himself with completion at 779 CE. The layout (Fig. 4) of the monastery is like a great mandala with the main temple in the center and all buildings surrounded by a fence wall topped by tiny chortens. There were four chortens at the east-south, south-west, west-north and north-east directions of the main temple but within the fence wall. These four chortens represented a protective sphere against the four demons of death, aggregates, defilements and heavenly gods. (Wong, 2014)

---

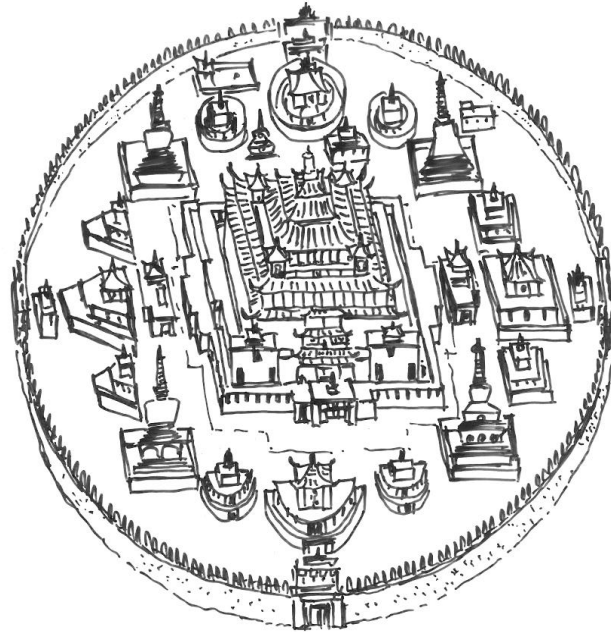
<sup>1</sup>Tao refers to the principle of Taoism that follows the law of nature.

<sup>2</sup>Taipei 101 (臺北101) is the Taipei World Financial Center (臺北國際金融中心), a super high-rise landmark (509m high) in Taiwan, and was completed in 2004.

<sup>3</sup>Emperor Trisong Detsen ruled Tibet from 755 to 797 CE and was regarded as one of the three important kings for the dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet.

<sup>4</sup>The detailed account of the invitation of Padmasambhava to Tibet was recorded in “The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism” by Dudjom Rinpoche.

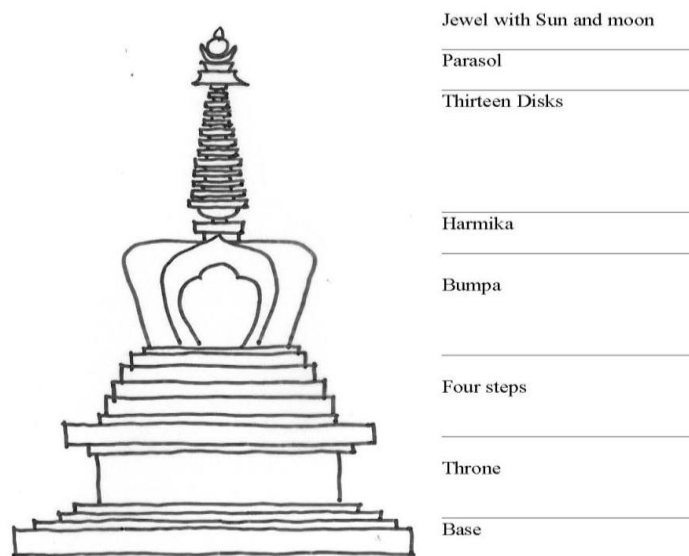
**Figure 4.** Mural of the original design for the Samye Monastery with the main temple at the centre, four groups of buildings to resemble the four continents and the eight sub-continents at the cardinal points as well as the four chortens



*Architectural Typology of the Chorten*

The chorten (Fig. 5) is a direct transformation from the Indian stupa. The composition of the chorten from the ground is the base, *medhi*, and throne which support the other parts. Then progressing upwards are four steps, the main body, *bumpa*, the *harmika* supporting on a central pole, *yasti*, one to thirteen disks *chatravali*, and then the parasol topped by the jewel tip with the sun and the moon.

**Figure 5.** The Components of the Chorten



Based on this basic configuration, there are variations to the chorten. The main portion that varies is usually the four steps where they can be altered from square to round shape, octagonal shape or even without steps. A special path can be added at the central axis of each flight. Doors can be added to the different tiers. In so doing, they assume different representation. Master Lama Tsering from Bhutan explained in “Dharmakaya Stupa” the meaning of the eight stupas to appreciate the purpose and benefits. These eight usually appear as a group and commemorate the Eight events in the life of Buddha Sakyamuni as (the brackets indicating the place of the event) (Phuoc, 2010, 4):

- (1) Lotus Blossom Stupa (Lumbini)
- (2) Enlightenment Stupa (Bodhgaya)
- (3) Stupa of First Sermon or Multitudinous Doors (Sarnath)
- (4) Stupa of Nirvana (Kushingar)
- (5) Stupa of Descent from Trayastrimsa heaven (Sankasya)
- (6) Stupa of Great Miracles (Sravasti)
- (7) Stupa of Reconciliation of Dissent (Rajagriha)
- (8) Stupa of Complete Victory (Vaishali)

Construction of the stupa is a ritual in itself. Pema Dorjee’s thesis titled “Stupa and its technology : A Tibetan-Buddhist Perspective” (1996) presents the ritualistic procedure of constructing the stupa with steps as: Commencement rites, recital, examination of the site, the earth, the orientation and defects, possession of the site, removal of adversities from the site, paying homage to the earth-lord, initial digging, removal of defective soil, rites during construction, layout of the ground, actual construction works, correct arrangement of ritualistic objects, mandala and axle pole, rites after completion of construction.

#### *Symbolism of the Chorten*

The chorten can have many levels of meanings but they generally are concise comprehension of the philosophy. For instance, it is a Tibetan common belief and categorization for all life and physical things to be made from four elements which are earth, water, fire and wind. The additional fifth element of emptiness<sup>1</sup> however does not imply nothingness but rather the indetermined potential (to become any one or any combination of the four elements). In the chorten, the square base signifies the element of earth. The hemispherical dome (*bumpa*) signifies the element of water. The conical spire signifies the element of fire. The parasol signifies the element of wind and the jewel tip with the sun and moon the element of emptiness.

From another perspective, the nature of earth represents stability. The nature of water represents penetrability. The nature of fire represents vitality.

---

<sup>1</sup>Emptiness points to the wisdom of transcendence. When the conventional is transcended, though one is faced with that element, one can have mastery over that element.

The nature of wind represents spontaneity. The nature of emptiness represents non-obstructiveness. These natures are present everywhere even within us. However, the degree of presence depends on one's adaptation to the contextual limitations. For instance, vitality decreases with age as the human body getting older and more difficult to adapt to life conditions.

In the "The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs", Robert Beer (1999) explains the stupa to correspond to various Dharma meanings : four mindfulness, four correct endeavors, four miraculous legs, five moral faculties, seven conditions of enlightenment, eightfold path, ten knowledge of the Buddha as well as relative and absolute Bodhicitta<sup>1</sup>. This presents a way of learning and realization from our ordinary mind to attain the enlightened mind.

### *The Five Paths of Enlightenment*

The path to enlightenment can be summarized in five paths which constitute a sequential process rather than five different ways. These can be represented by the stupa. They are the path of accumulation, the path of preparation, the path of insight, the path of cultivation and the path of no-more-learning.

The throne and base is the essential initial support for the chorten. It signifies the path of accumulation<sup>2</sup> (Mipham, 2000). The path has to prepare one to be suitable for the ultimate realization of the Dharmakaya (the Buddha's wisdom), hence a wide range of knowledge and thorough view of the Dharma have to be learned and preliminary practices taken for realization of the view.

The four steps on the chorten are progressing stages. It signifies the four stages in the path of preparation (joining)<sup>3</sup>: Heat, summit, acceptance and supreme attribute. These four stages have focus from the external objects to the inner mind as well as the discriminative consciousness to the non-conceptual awareness. The four sides of the steps show that the mind is still limited by the conventional thoughts to fall on four philosophical extremes which are existence, non-existence, existence and non-existence as well as neither existence nor non-existence.

The *bumpa* dome is the collection of a variety of ritual objects yet with a simple almost non-discriminating appearance. This denotes the path of insight<sup>4</sup> which is the direct perception of the reality of the *dharmata* through non-conceptual awareness together with discriminative consciousness. This is a state of coalescence of the states of consciousness and wisdom awareness. It can be called the entry to non-conceptuality.

---

<sup>1</sup>Bodhicitta is the enlightened mind. The relative mind is the great compassion shown in the worldly phenomena while the absolute mind is the wisdom of the Buddha.

<sup>2</sup>Accumulation is to accumulate provisions of merits and wisdom to enable one has the body and mind to learn and progress forward on the path of enlightenment.

<sup>3</sup>Preparation is to prepare one for the experience of suchness or reality as it is. Joining is to connect the path of accumulation to the path of insight i.e. knowledge connected with realization.

<sup>4</sup>Insight is to see the reality as it is. This is a glimpse into the Buddha mind so it is also called contact of suchness.

The thirteen disks represent the path of cultivation<sup>1</sup>. There are thirteen stages for practices and realization to the Buddha mind – the ten stages of bodhisattva<sup>2</sup> and three parallel stages through emphasis on the Dharmakaya, the Sambhogakaya and the Nirmanakaya<sup>3</sup>. It is a path of removal of obstructions caused by our notions, conceptuality and subtle habitual tendency.

The sun and moon with the jewel tip indicate the path of no-more-learning<sup>4</sup>. The sun and moon represent the most subtle duality we acquired from space-time as habitual tendency. When one finally transcends this obscuration, one has no obstruction to Buddhahood. The jewel tip just represents the state of ultimate non-conceptuality. One is said to realize this through the vajra-like Samadhi which is the causal position of Buddhahood.

Chorten (Tibetan: *mchod rten*) also means the Buddha mind and the field of offering. This is the collection of essence from everything, the mental capacities, the physical objects, the path of enlightenment, etc as the field of offering to the Buddha mind. The action, the objects and the minds of offering – these three should be compatible for the perfection of the action. When the intrinsic nature of everything is identified and experienced as the nature of the Buddha mind, this is the true offering. This is also the Tathagatagarbha wisdom.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The stupa in India, the pagoda in China and the chorten in Tibet marked the commencement of Buddhism wisdom in the respective countries. In India, it is the completion of the teachings by Buddha Sakyamuni ready to be organized and disseminated into the world. In China and Japan, it is the start of the teachings on Mahayana Buddhism followed by Zen and esoteric Buddhism. In Tibet, it is the start of Vajrayana Buddhism with the subsequent schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Indian stupa is symbolized as the Dharmakaya, the Buddha's inner self-realization wisdom, which is the ultimate goal for practices and realization. The Han pagoda represents our conventional world when Buddhism starts to intermingle. It is our ordinary mind that is the starting point to understand the Dharma. The Tibetan chorten provides the path, the means to go from the starting point to the inconceivable objective.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cultivation means to cultivate the higher stages of practices and realization. It is basically a path of removing obscurations which become more subtle as one progresses.

<sup>2</sup>The ten stages of Bodhisattva (enlightened beings) start with the initial stage of perfect joy, then stages of immaculate, luminous, radiant, hard to keep, clearly manifest, far progressed, immovable (eighth stage), perfect intellect and the tenth stage of cloud of dharma.

<sup>3</sup>Dharmakaya is the inconceivable formless state of wisdom. Nirmanakaya is the emanated appearance of the Buddha mind in this mundane world. Sambhogakaya is the emanated appearance beyond our ordinary state of consciousness. However, to become the Buddha, the three kayas cannot be discriminated i.e. one cannot have emphasis on any of the kayas.

<sup>4</sup>No-more-learning does not rely on knowledge. Even teaching has to be done in the Zen way of "pointing to the moon with finger". This is called pointing instruction.

Hence, the presentation of origin and meaning of the Buddhist architecture – stupa, pagoda and chorten – is completed.

## References

- Beer, R., (1999), "The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs", Shambala, pg.128-130
- Brown, P., (1942), "Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu Period)", Percy Brown
- Dhavalikar, M.K., (2002), "Monumental Legacy, Sanchi", Oxford University Press
- Dohring, K., (2000), "Buddhist Stupa (Phra Chedi) Architecture of Thailand", White Lotus
- Dudjom Rinpoche (1991), "The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism", Wisdom, pg. 513-515
- Fisher, R.E., (1993), "Buddhist Art and Architecture", Thomas & Hudson, pg. 96-98
- Hardy, A., (2007), "The Temple Architecture of India", Wiley, pg. 74-76
- Lama Tsering, (1998), "Dharmakaua Stupa", Ad graphic Pte Ltd
- Ling, H., 2004, "Buddhism in China", China International Press, pg. 10-14
- Miksic, J. (1990), "Borobudur, Golden Tales of the Buddha", Shambhala
- Mipham Rinpoche, (2000), "Gateway to Knowledge, Volume II", Rangjung Yeshe publications, pg. 143-157
- Pema Dorjee, (1996), "'Stupa and its Technology: A Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective", Indira Gandhi and Motilal Banarsidas, pg. 23-48
- Phuoc, L.H., (2010), 1, "Buddhist Architecture", Grafikol, pg. 28-29
- Phuoc, L.H., (2010), 2, "Buddhist Architecture", Grafikol, pg. 150-156
- Phuoc, L.H., (2010), 3, "Buddhist Architecture", Grafikol, pg. 181-189
- Phuoc, L.H., (2010), 4, "Buddhist Architecture", Grafikol, pg. 229-232
- Red Pine, (1989), "The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma", North Point Press, pg. 101
- Snodgrass, A., (2007), "The Symbolism of the Stupa", Motilal Banarsidass, pg. 126-129
- Stein, L., and Ngawang Zampo, (2013), "Buton's History of Buddhism", Snow Lion, pg.176-180
- Suzuki, K., (1980), "Early Buddhist Architecture in Japan", Kodansha International
- Wayman, A. and Wayman, H., (1974), "The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala, A Buddhist Scripture on the Tathagatagarbha Theory", Motilal Banarsidass, pg. 98
- Wikipedia, (online), "Stupa" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stupa>
- Wikipedia, (online), "Sanchi", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanchi>
- Wikipedia, (online), "Chinese pagoda", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_pagoda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_pagoda)
- Wong, W.S., (2014), article on "Introduction to Omniscient Wisdom – Architecture of the Heart Sutra, the Mandala and the Samye Monastery" in "Great Bliss, Great Perfection", Monograph Series in Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Studies