

84,000 Stupas of ASHOKA Dr Uday Dokras

At one time, Buddhism was dominant with thousand of stupas all over India as written by Chinese travellers.

Why were stupas built ?

Stupas were the mounds put on the bodily remains of the body of Lord Buddha or of any object that was used by him. At the place of stupas such objects were buried. These were places of great respect under the tradition of Buddhism as they had the relics of Buddha. As per the description of Asokavadana which a famous Buddhist book Emperor Asoka gave Buddha's relic to all major cities. Later on such places stupas were put. The most important stupas are at Sanchi Bharhut and Saranath.

How were stupas built? Or the structure of stupa :

The structure of a stupa was like a dome and hemisphere. On the top of it there would be a balcony called harmik. This balcony represented the abode of God. The harmik was covered with an umbrella. There used to be railings around the balcony. The construction of the stupas was made possible by the contribution of many. On the forefront were the monarchs. The Satvahan Kings offered huge amount for the construction of the stupas . Apart from the monarchs merchants artisans and common men and women also contributed to the construction of the stupas.

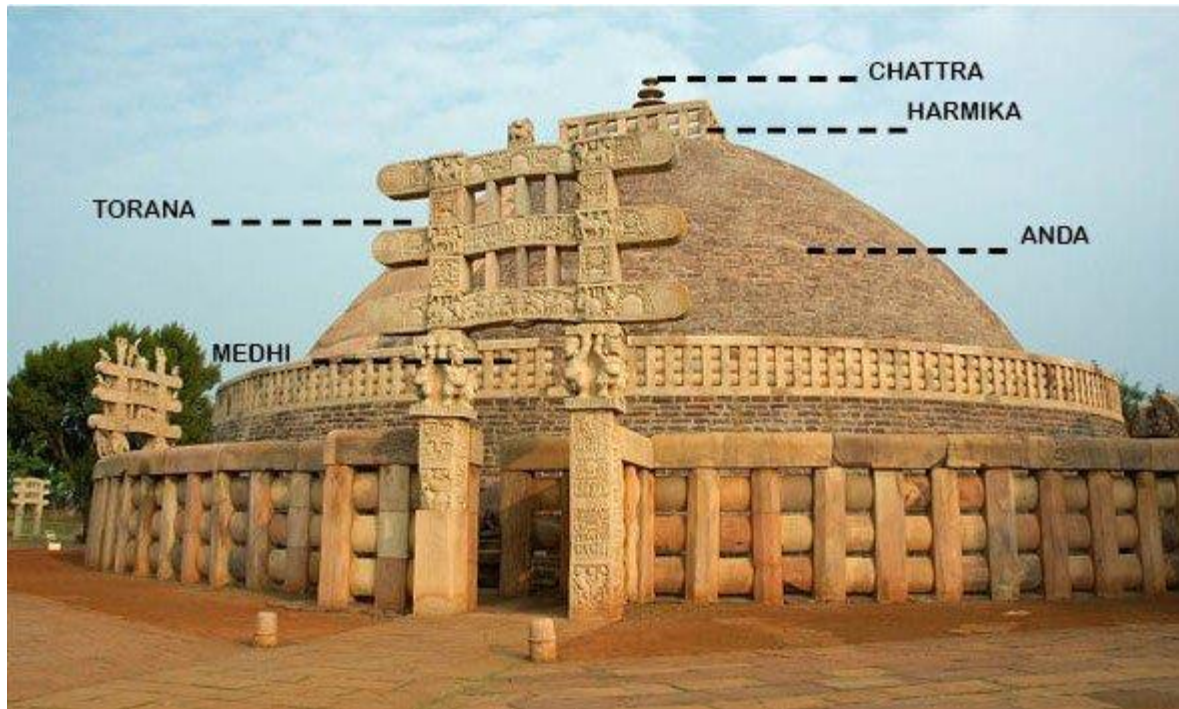
Circular shape of the Stupa is the symbol of cycle of birth and death. so stupas are the place where a monk is buried or the bones (Asthi) of the monks are kept inside. to get free from the cycle of birth and death . stupas are circular. The stupas you will find in the Himalayas are mostly hollow and filled with relics and holy artefacts like prayer flags and texts. The stupas are an embodiment of the mind of the Buddha and typically used as a place to hold relics of spiritual masters. Stupas are a place where Buddhist monks perform meditation. Several stupas have been discovered in the regions ruled by Ashoka, such as the ruined Bhamala Stupa, beside the Khanpur lake in Pakistan. Here is a visualization of what it looked like in the past. The stupa is the most important religious structure of Buddhist architecture. It is a mound or hemisphere that represents the enlightenment of Buddha and houses sacred Buddhist relics like the ashes of Buddha. It is the focal point of Buddhist prayer halls, and most rituals are done around the stupa.

India indeed had thousands of stupas, chaityas, temples and other shrines, and universities dotting the landscape of this beautiful country. How they vanished is not a great mystery. Islamic chroniclers have recounted with great relish how these were burnt and destroyed, and their residents killed by the marauding fanatics of Islam in their zeal to eradicate "butparasti" (icon worship-- the word "but" is derived from Buddha) and to establish the supremacy of Islam and Muslims over the indigenous people. This was part of one of the most gruesome genocides ever seen by humanity, perpetuated in the name of religion, in which millions were killed and many more enslaved and converted.

The second part of the question (about Hindu mandirs built over them) is really surprising. Why would Hindus destroy stupas to build mandirs when Buddha is one of the avatars of Vishnu universally venerated by Hindus? There is no historical evidence to support this wild

surmise. On the other hand, there is ample evidence to show that mosques and dargahs were set up over these destroyed religious places.

A stupa is a Buddhist structure. It mainly contains a hemispherical structure or mound called the *anda* that contains Buddhist relics. It is the point of emphasis in The **Chaitiya** or prayer hall and is located in the center or at the far end of the hall. The stupa form evolved from pre-Buddhist burial grounds in India. Buddhists perform rituals and pray around the stupa. The stupa is said to symbolize the enlightenment of Buddha and is also considered being a form of seated Buddha meditating.



The Great Sanchi Stupa, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India.

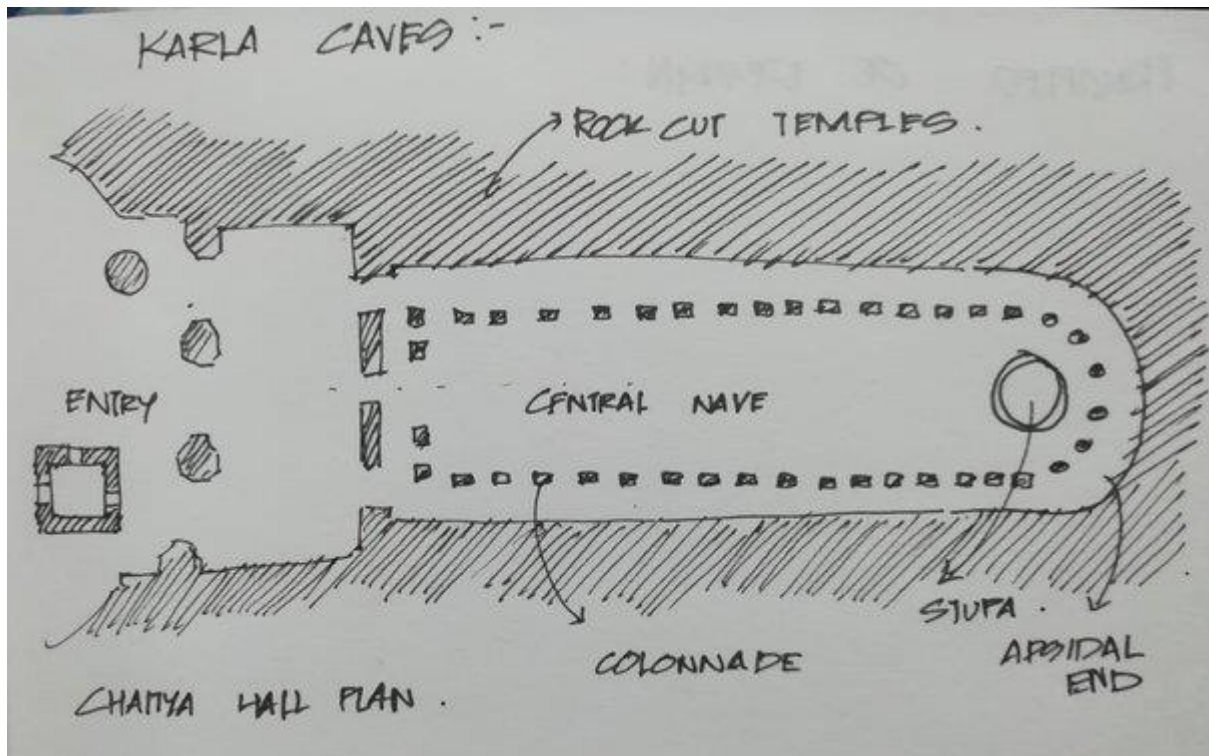
The stupa houses sacred relics like remains of Buddha's ashes in the relic chamber called the *tabena*.

The square railing that's on top of the stupa signifies its sacredness and is called the *harmika*. It surrounds the central pillar that supports a triple umbrella-like structure called the *chattra* which symbolizes protecting the stupa from natural elements and all evil. The three disks of the umbrella symbolize the three key elements of the faith: 1. Buddha 2. Dharma 3. Sangha

Toranas were gateways that were positioned in all 4 cardinal directions of the stupa.

Medhi is the raised circular path around the stupa mainly used for circumambulation around the stupa during rituals.

Olden rock-cut temples had small stupas at the far end of inside the temple and the passages for circumambulation were enclosed by columns on either side. Eg: Karla caves



schematic planning of Karla caves chaitya hall.

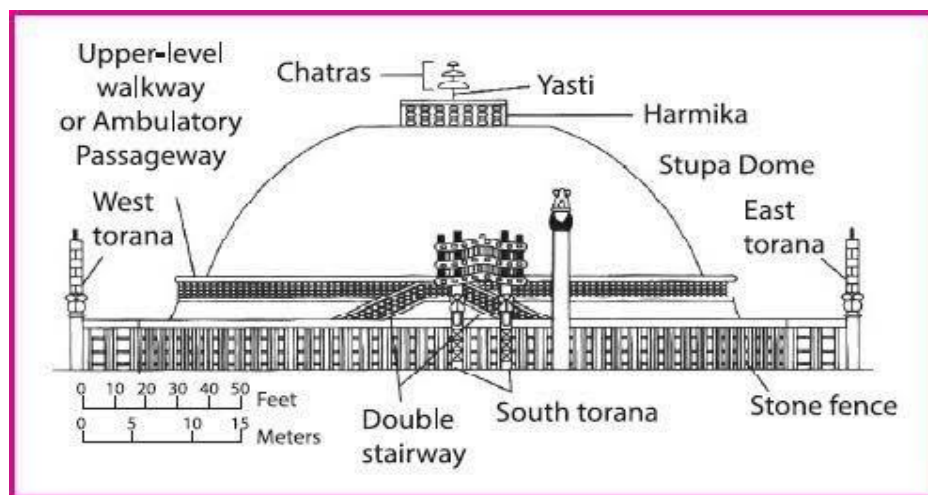
The devotional act of building a stupa is thought to bring one good luck, health, good karma, and assure one of either an escape from the cycle of rebirth and death (samsara) which is a goal of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism or, at least, a good rebirth in another life on earth in which one will attain this goal. Destruction of a stupa, conversely, brings bad luck, bad karma, and condemns one to repeated life cycles in order to atone for the sin. Stupas are, therefore, highly regarded around the world and no expense is spared in their upkeep. They are regarded as vitally important sacred sites, marking a liminal space outside of time or circumstance, wherever they are constructed, and draw visitors – of all faiths or none – on a daily basis.

Stupa became an integral part of Buddhist architecture. It was not only considered as the living presence of Buddha which have the protective powers of Buddha, stupa was also considered as a place for rituals and ceremonies. It also became a pilgrimage centre for the Buddhists.

One of the ancient texts of Buddhism known as Mahaparinivara Sutra mentions that the ashes of Buddha were divided into eight portions. Each kingdom where Buddha lived received one portion of the relics and a stupa was erected in each kingdom. The eight stupas where relics of Buddha were spread are Rajagriha, Vaishali, Kapilavastu, Allakappa, Ramagrama, Pava, Kushinagar and Vethapida. Buddhists source further claim that the great Mauryan Emperor Ashoka took a portion of relics from the earlier stupa and erected around 84,000 stupas across India. Credit goes to King Ashoka of building three different types of monuments like pillars, stupas and rock cut caves. King Ashoka has set up at least 30 pillars which have edicts and carvings on it. During his period the word stupa first appeared on an inscription in Nigali Sagar Pillar.

The relics of Buddha are considered as living presence of Buddha which still has power and energy of Buddha. It is believed that Buddha has left instructions about how to pay homage in stupas. The stupas were highly decorated with sculptural reliefs and the life history of Buddha.

Stupas were built for various reasons. Based on the reason and function the stupas are classified into five different types. Relics stupa where the remains of Buddha and his disciple are present. Object stupa such as the material object like begging bowl, robe of Buddha or his disciple is present. Commemorative stupa is built to recall the events that took place in the life of Buddha. The other two include the Symbolic stupa and votive stupa. The railings and the gateways are the most important architecture in Bharhut, Bodh Gaya and Sanchi. In the south it is at Amravati and Nagarjunakonda. Cross bars were provided as support for the pillars and the domes. Above this were the finest carvings of Buddha were kept. Some of the other carvings also included Jataka stories, elephant, Lion, Bull and also the previous births of Buddha.



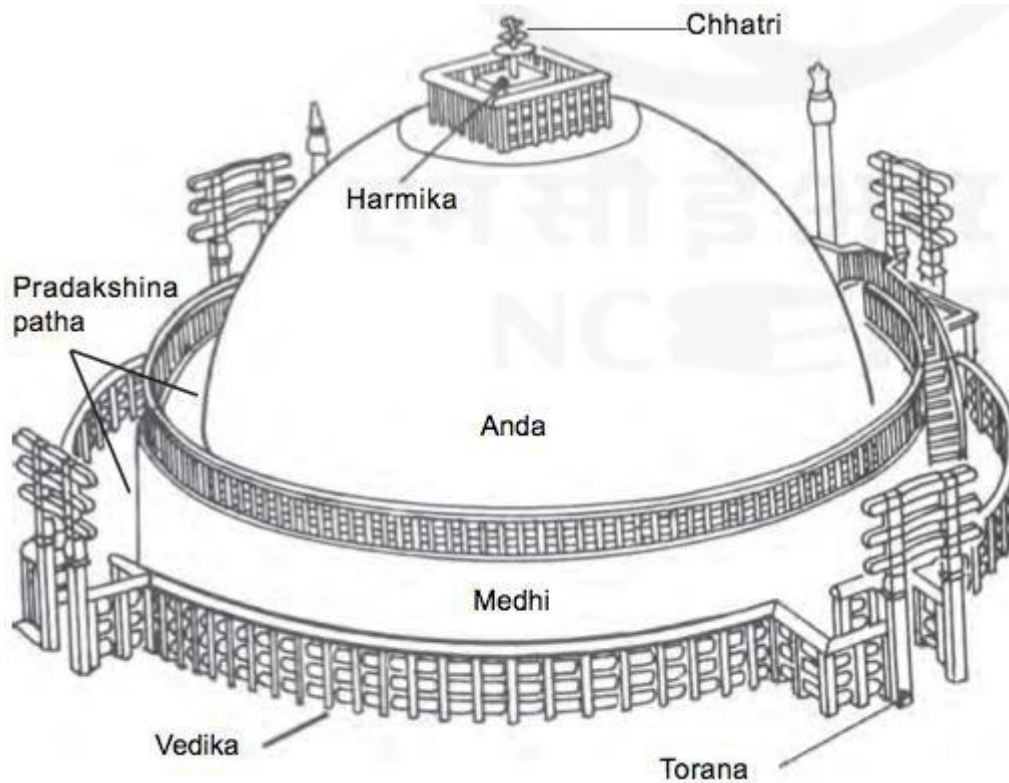
The stupa was not unknown in India before the time of Ashoka. From the time Ashoka divided up the existing body relics of the Buddha and erected monuments to enshrine them, the stupas became the objects of cult worship. In Buddhist tradition, originally the 9 stupas were built after the death of Buddha - 8 of them over the relics and 9th over the vessel in which the relics were originally deposited. Stupas were constructed over the relics of the Buddha at Rajagraha, Vaishali, Kapilvastu, Allakapa, Ramagrama, Vethadipa, Pava, Kushinagar and Pippalvina.

The core of the stupa was made up of unburnt brick and the outer face of burnt brick, covered with thick layer of plaster. The stupa was crowned by an umbrella of wooden fence enclosing a path for pradaskshina (circumambulatory path). One of the best examples of the structure of a stupa in the third century BCE is at Bairat in Rajasthan. It is a very grand stupa having a circular mound with a circumambulatory path. The great stupa at Sanchi was built with bricks during the time of Ashoka and later it was covered with stone and many new additions were made.

In the subsequent century, stupas were elaborately built with certain additions like the enclosing of the circumambulatory path with railings and sculptural decoration. There were numerous stupas constructed earlier but expansions or new additions were made in the

second century BCE. The stupa consists of a cylindrical drum and a circular anda with a harmika and chhatra on the top which remain consistent throughout with minor variations and changes in shape and size. The three chhatra on the stupas represent triratnas of Buddhism i.e. Buddha (The enlightened), Dhamma (doctrine) and Sangh (order).

Apart from the circumambulatory path, gateways were added. Thus, with the elaborations in stupa architecture, there was ample space for the architects and sculptors to plan elaborations and to carve out images.



During the early phase of Buddhism, Buddha is depicted symbolically through footprints, stupas, lotus throne, chakra, etc. This indicates either simple worship, or paying respect, or at times depicts historicisation of life events. Gradually narrative became a part of the Buddhist tradition. Thus events from the life of the Buddha, the Jataka stories, were depicted on the railings and torans of the stupas. Mainly synoptic narrative, continuous narrative and episodic narrative are used in the pictorial tradition. While events from the life of the Buddha became an important theme in all the Buddhist monuments, the Jataka stories also became equally important for sculptural decorations. The main events associated with the Buddha's life which were frequently depicted were events related to the birth, renunciation, enlightenment, dhammachakrapravartana, and mahaparinibbana (death). Among the Jataka stories that are frequently depicted are Chhadanta Jataka, Vidurpundita Jataka, Ruru Jataka, Sibi Jataka, Vessantara Jataka and Shama Jataka.

There were three types of Buddhist buildings which were majorly built during ancient India. Chaitya, Vihara and Stupa. Well, you must be aware that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. It means that Buddhism does not believe in a creator god. In fact, Buddha statues were not part of original Dhamma. It was after 2 centuries (of Buddha's death) that statues got popularized. So, a religion with no God, no statue, no divine thing to hinge upon. But they needed someone to have

moral authority over Sangha. From this thought, stupa came into the picture. (Stupas were not unique to Buddhism, but later on became synonymous with Buddhism). Stupa contains the mortal remains of the great teacher which still holds his/her moral authority over the follower. Secondly, stupas are constructed in a manner(same way like pyramid, temple) to act as a source of energy. You must have felt a different feeling while standing near a religious site.

Thirdly, stupas are great site to build Chaitya(prayer houses) and to build a whole community around it. The biggest Buddhist communities were the famed Universities of India. Second biggest assembly places were stupa along with Chaitya. And then there were viharas in remote places for meditation/meetings etc.

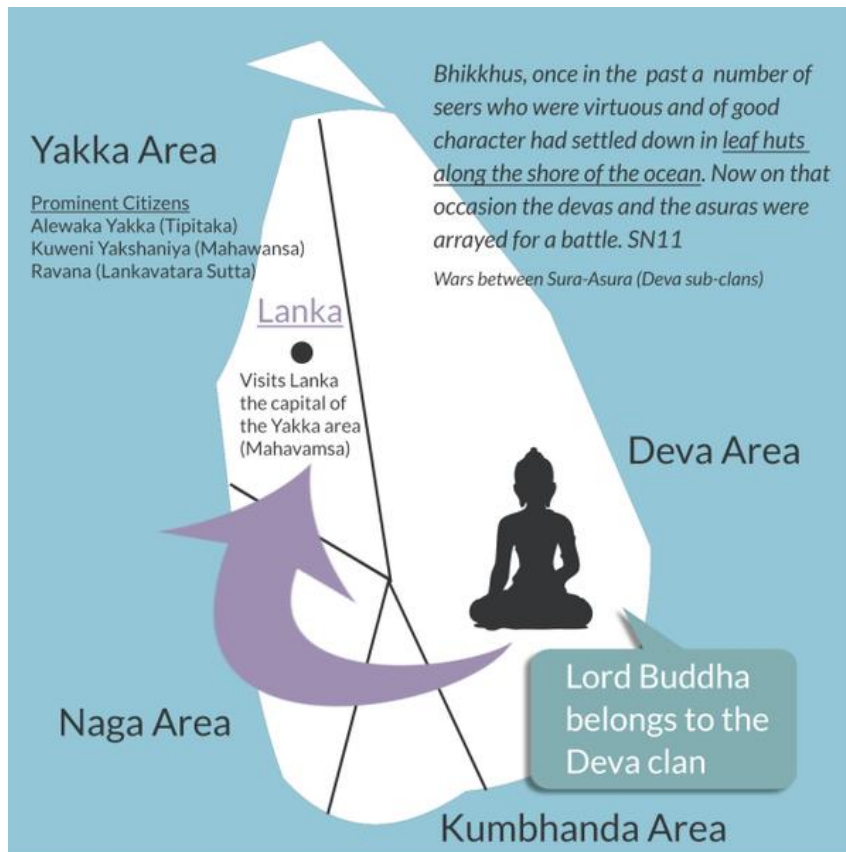
King Ashoka had built 84000 Stupas. Why did he build so many?

84000 sounds exaggerated but he did build stupas because he wanted to propagate dhamma as far as possible and also if you consider the fact that it was not merely religious devotion but also a political agenda that could come to resonate with the wishes of caste ridden people who viewed ashoka as a hope and from now their king would uphold beliefs that would understand their problems with the varna system.

He typically built stupas at the sites related to life of buddha for example the place of his first sermon and his nirvana and the place where he died. Other stupas did not have relics of buddha but were built on his orders in order to propagate buddhism. This is a legendary number, which is certainly an exaggeration. From the inscriptions, it's clear that Ashoka, while obviously Buddhist himself, wanted to appeal to all of his citizens, not just the Buddhists. The extent of his patronage of Buddhism by acts like building stupas is unknown, but it is known that he supported other religions as well.

Rather than being seen as a supporter of devotional Buddhism, as he is depicted in the Sri Lankan chronicles, he is better regarded as a Buddhist secularist. Relying on Buddhist ethical teachings, he developed a policy of rational and compassionate ethics that could be acceptable to the many kinds of believers and non-believers found in his realm.

Asoka built the temples in the region to the east of the island of Sri Lanka. This was known as "Jambudipa". The Sutta reference mentions how the area is close to the shores of the ocean.



Ashoka built many temples. Although no one temple stands out as the “largest”.

King Ashoka is significant for 2 things. The Buddhist council resurrected the Dhamma being corrupted and sent emissaries to adjoining nations spreading Buddhism.

He sent Venerable Mahinda to the adjoining nation known then as “Lanka”. Tipitka mention this area as Uturukuru dipa.

Jambudipa

1. **Sanchi Stupa** Information. When Ashoka built the Great **Stupa**, he had at the nucleus a huge hemispherical brick dome covering the relics of Lord Buddha, with an elevated terrace surrounding the base, a balustrade, and a chatra or stone umbrella on the top to indicate high rank. Sanchi Stupa was built by emperor Ashoka at the request of his queen Vaishali. The vast dome enshrines a sacred relic of Buddha. There are four toranas (arches) with scenes from Jathaka tales. The domes in the complex have three umbrellas atop, representing the three holy books of Buddhism known as Thripitakas. Two more domes are present in the complex to represent Sariputhra and Maha Moggalana, two disciples of Buddha. There are well preserved structures in the complex which are in Greek style, probably influenced by Greeks who settled in India and adopted Buddhism. The "Great Stupa" at Sanchi is the oldest structure and was originally commissioned by the emperor Ashoka the Great of the Maurya Empire in the 3rd century BCE.
2. **Kesaria Stupa** in **East Champaran** district is home to one of the most striking architectural wonders of India. The tallest stupa of the ancient and medieval era, taller than the Indonesia's Borobudur Stupa is located in Kesaria (known as Kessaputta' in ancient India). Its current height is 104 feet (earlier 150 ft but reduced due to earthquake).

3. The **Kanishka stupa** was a monumental stupa established by the *Kushan king Kanishka* during the 2nd century CE in today's Shaji-ki-Dheri on the outskirts of Peshawar, Pakistan.

The stupa was built during the Kushan era to house Buddhist relics, and would become perhaps the tallest buildings in the ancient world. The stupa is also famous for its Buddhist relics, which were transferred to the U Khanti Hall at Mandalay Hill, in Mandalay, Burma after their discovery.

Height: 400 feet (120 m) to 560 feet (170 m)

About 200 years after the time of Buddha King Asoka erected a pillar at Lumbini. This was to announce the visit of Buddha to this place.