

# The Stupa

Buddhism in Symbolic Form

Jay G. Williams



Gwenfrewi Santes Press  
“Wherever the head rolls”



**According to legend, there lived in ancient times a virgin by the name of Gwenfrewi, who was desired in marriage by Caradoc, a prince of Cymru. His request refused, he attempted to carry her off by force. Gwenfrewi fled, pursued by the prince, who in a great rage, struck off her head, which bounded down the hill into a vale to a church, and on the spot where it rested a spring of amazing capacity bubbled forth. Gwenfrewi's uncle, St. Beuno, who was officiating in a church, rushed out, replaced the severed head and, with a prayer, restored the virgin to life. Thus was Gwenfrewi Santes born.**

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## Foreword

This work has been a long time in the making. It was, at first, part of a much larger study on religious symbolism around the world. I traveled that world looking for examples, for deeper insights. Many pictures were taken and many words were written, but nothing quite came right. The manuscript lay in the file, unfinished.

Then, more recently, as I sorted through my slides and prints, it all came clear. Concentrate just on the one great Buddhist symbol and forget the rest. That is enough. So I rewrote and rearranged and rethought. The result is this small volume.

My first idea was to place the photographs in the text so that the reader would not have to flip back and forth. The more I studied the problem, however, the more complicated that way of organizing the book became and so, finally, I decided on the format now used. The first part of the book contains some figures, but none of my photographs. These are arranged by country in Part II along with very short identifications and discussions. References to them will be found in Part I, but the reader---and I apologize for this--- will have to flip back and forth to see what I am talking about.

Most of the photographs I took myself, though I have had to glean from elsewhere pictures and plans of Borobudur and a few other places. Pictures that are not mine are starred. The fact that the photographs are almost all mine means, of course, that many important stupas are not pictured in the book. I simply could not travel everywhere. I do believe, however, that I was able to photograph many of the most important sites---enough at least to give the reader a clear picture of the variety of forms and styles.

It has been a great joy for me to return to a subject I have always found so intriguing and inspiring. I have tried to keep the book from being too technical or erudite. It is meant, not for the specialist, but for the general reader. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have in writing it.

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## **Table of Contents**

Foreword

Table of Contents

Part I: The Stupa	1
The Stupa and its Symbolism	15
The Pilgrimage	25
The Cosmic Man	29
The Chorten	31
Part II: Illustrations	35
I. Nepal	37
II. India	44
III. Myanmar and Thailand	61
IV. Sri Lanka	72
V. Borobudur	81
VI. China	86
VII. Korea and Japan	98
Epilogue	103
Bibliography	

## THE STUPA

There is no doubt but that the stupa (Pali: *thupa*; Sinhalese; *dagoba*) is the most distinctive and suggestive symbol to have emerged from the Buddhist tradition.<sup>1</sup> Wherever the disciples of the Enlightened One have gone, they have built stupas as the very signature of their presence. To be sure, different peoples have interpreted the stupa in very different ways. To the uninformed, in fact, it would hardly seem that the Sinhalese *dagoba* and the Japanese pagoda are the same symbol at all. Nevertheless, there is a sure, though invisible line linking the earthbound, simple mound of the Asokan tradition (See I.B.) to both the soaring golden monuments of Yagon (Rangoon) (II.B.) and the many roofed towers of Kyoto (VII. E.).

According to the *Digha Nikaya*, the stupa idea was first set forth by the Buddha, himself, just before his death.

10. 'What are we to do, lord, with the remains of the Tathagata?'

'Hinder not yourselves, Ananda, by honouring the remains of the Tathagata. Be zealous, I beseech you, Ananda, in your own behalf! Devote yourselves to your own good! Be earnest, be zealous, be intent on your own good! There are wise men, Ananda, among the nobles, among the Brahmins, among the heads of houses, who are firm believers in the Tathagata; and they will do due honour to the remains of the Tathagata.'

11. 'But what should be done, lord, with the remains of the Tathagata?'

'As men treat the remains of the king of kings so Ananda, should they treat the remains of a Tathagata.'

'And how, lord, do they treat the remains of a king of kings?'

'They wrap the body of a king of kings, Ananda, in a new cloth. When that is done they wrap it in carded cotton wool. When that is done they wrap it in a new cloth, and so on till they have wrapped the body in five hundred successive layers of both kinds. Then they place the body in an oil vessel of iron, and cover that close up with another oil vessel of iron. They then build a funeral pyre of all kinds of perfume, and burn the body of the king of kings. And then at the four cross roads they erect a cairn to the king of kings. This, Ananda, is the way in which they treat the remains of a king of kings.'

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most elaborate and extensive study of the stupa is Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa* (Ithaca, N.Y.: SEAP, 1985).

'And as they treat the remains of a king of kings, so, Ananda, should they treat the remains of the Tathagata. At the four cross roads a cairn should be erected to the Tathagata. And whosoever shall there place garlands or perfumes or paint, or make salutation there, or become in its presence calm in heart—that shall long be to them for a profit and a joy.'<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the stupa, then, is overtly derived within the tradition itself from the notion of the cairn, barrow, or tumulus, that rounded mound of earth which served, from East Asia to the far reaches of the Celtic world, as a burial place for the mighty. In some non-Buddhist areas the cairn was elongated and became less circular and more serpentine in structure. In other areas, the mound of earth was faced by stone and/or plaster and became pyramidal in shape with sharp, well-hewn edges. The stupa, then, is related to a whole host of familiar Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds ranging from the pyramid of Cheops to the great tumulus of New Grange. It is a continuation of a tradition which seems to know no beginning or particular area of origin. The stupa is a variation upon a primordial symbolic theme.

It is ironic that of all the tumuli once built in India very few non-Buddhist stupas remain. Gautama patterned his own symbol after the tumuli of the great kings. Indeed, he even lists the king of kings as among those whose remains a stupa might contain.

12. 'The men, Ananda, worthy of a cairn, are four in number. Which are the four?'

'A Tathagata, an Able Awakened One, is worthy of a cairn. One awakened for himself alone is worthy of a cairn. A true hearer of the Tathagata is worthy of a cairn. A king of kings is worthy of a cairn.'<sup>3</sup>

The royal tumuli, for the most part, have all been destroyed or eroded away. So too have the Jain stupas which were apparently patterned after the Buddhist. What remains of the thousands of non-Buddhist and Buddhist stupas that once dotted the landscape of India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are a few Buddhist structures scattered across the land. They stand in mute testimony to the ascendance of Buddhism in India, to its victory among the non-Indian neighbors, and to its slow but steady decay in its motherland.

With the possible exception of an early example at Vaisali,<sup>4</sup> the oldest extant stupas derive from the age of Asoka (ca. 274-232 B.C.E.), that Mauryan emperor who, in the

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<sup>2</sup> T.W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, 2 vols., (London: Oxford U. P.: 1910), 11,154-56. The Tibetan translation of the Vinaya-Irsudraka Vastu of the Mula sarvastivadins contains further "dialogues with the Buddha" pertaining to the construction of stupas. See Pema Doyce, *Stupa and Its Technology: A Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective* (New Delhi: India Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), pp. 1-21.

<sup>3</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha* II, 156.

<sup>4</sup> Debala Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1971), 75.



face of the bloody slaughter of the people of Kalinga (Orissa) by his troops, repented of the carnage and converted, it would seem, to Buddhism. Asoka, like Constantine in the West, made his own personal faith that of his empire. Clearly, his motives were more than political. He adopted Buddhist ideals concerning the organization of the state and the nature of justice and reordered his kingdom accordingly. He publicly promulgated Buddhist morality, as his many Rock and Pillar Edicts show.<sup>5</sup> He organized Buddhist councils and settled disputes within the *Sangha* (the monastic community).

And he built stupas, more than 84,000 of them according to one ancient source. Doubtless the number is both symbolic and exaggerated, but it must be remembered that many stupas were probably small, just mounds of earth, really. Quickly they eroded away, leaving behind the better-made stupas for us to see. Several of the Asoka stupas, like Stupa #1 at Sanchi (II.D.), have been preserved only as the core of a now much larger and elaborated edifice. The original core of the Dharmarajika stupa at Sarnath (II.R) is also ascribed to him as are stupas in Taxila, Pakistan and Patan, Nepal.

India is a land of great antiquity as its own Vedas and Epics indicate. Until the time of Asoka, however, buildings were apparently made of wood and thatch and hence have long since disintegrated. Therefore, despite the fact that Buddhism only arose in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. and did not leave tangible remains until the reign of Asoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, these remains, except for the dramatic finds at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, are about the oldest structures left from ancient India for us to inspect. The history of Indian art and architecture, for all intents and purposes, begins with the stupa.

Those few stupas in India, Nepal, and Pakistan that represent the Asokan age are the soul of simplicity. The great stupa of Patan, Nepal (I. B.) sits simply on an unadorned base, a mound *anda* with a squarish platform (called an *harmika*) on top. There are no fancy gateways or *pradaksina* (circumambulation) paths. Many of the symbolic meanings bestowed upon the stupa by later ages cannot be applied to the Asokan stupas because, in fact, the features interpreted so lavishly are not yet visible. The stupa, as a monumental Buddhist tradition, is just coming into existence.

Even so, the Asokan stupas are more than mounds of earth. On top of the hemispheric mound invariably sits a quadrilateral platform (the *harmika*), reminiscent of a place of sacrifice. This originally was probably surmounted by a several-tiered umbrella, simple versions of which are found at Sanchi (II.M.). Whether this was also a feature of the pre-Buddhist burial mound or whether it is a specifically Buddhist innovation is a matter of debate. Some would argue that in earliest times, what "grew" out of the *harmika* was a real tree. In any event, even the earliest of the stupas are a combination of a base, a mound, a surmounting platform, and, probably, an honorific umbrella. Beneath the platform was placed the *raison d'etre* for the whole structure: the *bija* or seed, a relic of the Buddha himself or of one of his disciples or, in some cases, the Buddhist "creed" inscribed in some fashion. Asoka is said to have not only built stupas

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<sup>5</sup> N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, *The Edicts of Asoka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

but to have bestowed upon them valuable relics which, until his day, were stored elsewhere.

Some stupas, of course, have yielded no such relics at all to the modern investigator. Perhaps ancient treasure hunters made off with them centuries ago. In some instances, the stupa may have been built for a relic that it never, finally, received. It may also be that the relic still remains hidden away in the stupa in some unpredictable location. Given the ingenuity of ancient grave robbers around the world, in fact, it is surprising that any treasures at all have been found in modern times. The probable reason is that, unlike the pyramids, the stupas contained largely spiritual treasures of very little earthly value.

One of the more interesting relic discoveries was made at Sanchi, a site in north central India where some of the most characteristic early stupas are to be found. Stupa #1, the most famous of this group because of its wonderful gateways or *toranas*, (II.D-L, O) yielded nothing to the explorer, but Stupa #2 (II.P) nearby produced a great surprise: two stone boxes containing fragments of bones and few precious stones, remains attributed to Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, two of Gautama's most famous disciples. Obviously, when Asoka chose to lavish his attention upon Sanchi, these relics, originally housed elsewhere, were brought to grace this favored community.

Down the hill, on the western slope of Sanchi, is another modest-sized stupa labeled in modern times #3 (II.Q.). Here also relics were found, this time of a number of important Buddhist teacher-saints from the third and second centuries B.C.E. In this stupa, the reliquary was not placed directly beneath the *harmika* but to one side, presumably to fool the perennial grave robbers. Overall, finds in stupas have been of only modest worldly value. Rather than vast royal treasure troves, they contain a few bits of bone and ash, reminders of the spiritual splendor of those halcyon days of the faith.

The Mauryan Empire declined until, by 200 B.C.E., India had again split up into a myriad of political units. This era of social change, from 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., led eventually to the renaissance of Hinduism but it did not impede the development of the stupa. At Sanchi, for instance, the old Asokan stupa was greatly enlarged. Around it was built an enclosure with magnificent gateways that have never been matched in the history of Indian architecture. (II.E.) A lower and an upper *pradaksinapatha* were built for circumambulation by pilgrims. Although Bharhut, Amaravati, and the other stupas erected around this time are not as well preserved as those of Sanchi, their remains are also impressive. Indian craftsmen developed to a high degree their techniques of stone carving as they began to decorate with pedagogical pictures the various features of the stupa.

During this era stone workers were also active in the creation of monumental Buddhist caves. (II. U-Y) Out of solid rock were cut not only caves for monastic dwellings but bas reliefs and freestanding sculpture. Most scholars agree that until the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E., there was a general practice of not portraying the Buddha in ordinary human form. Instead, in the caves and on the stupas, he was represented by a tree, an

empty throne, footprints, the wheel of doctrine, a pillar surrounded with flame, or a stupa. The last was to indicate the Buddha as having entered nirvana.

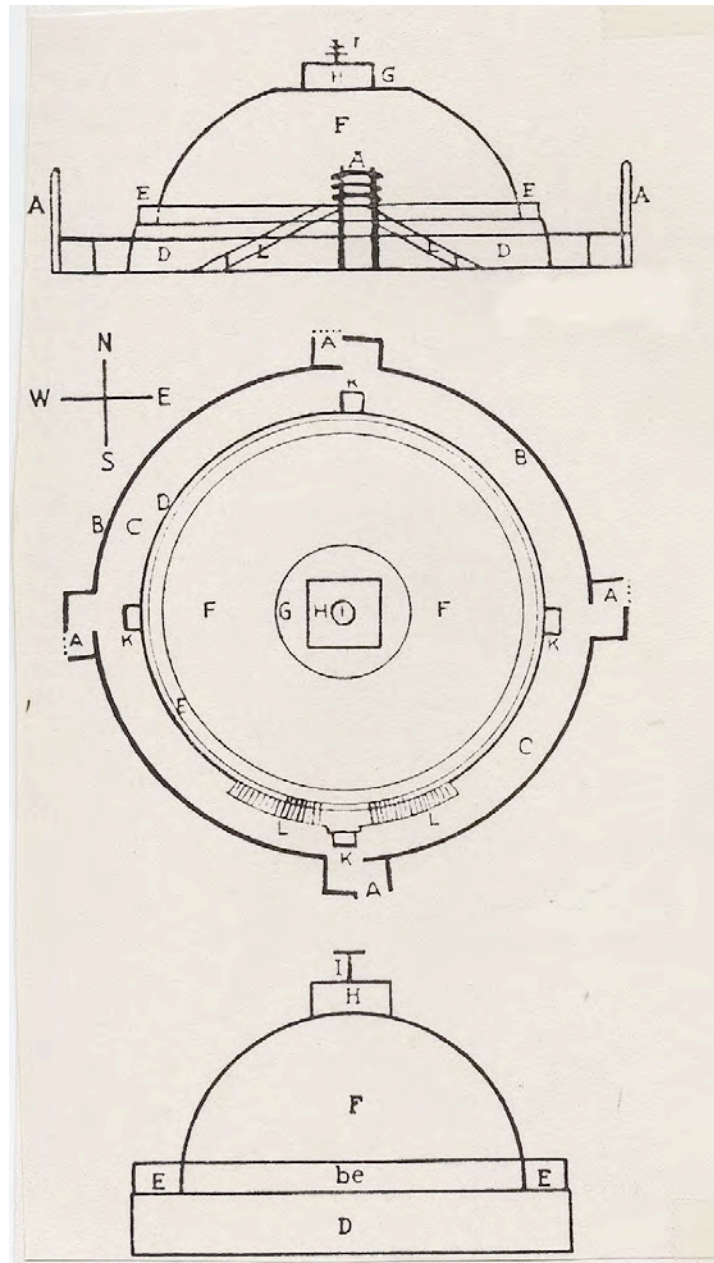


Figure 1 The shape of Stupa #1 at Sanchi

What was once taken by Western scholars as, for instance, tree worship was not that at all. Depicted are disciples bowing before the empty space where once their spiritual master sat under the Bodhi tree. Like that empty space, the stupa is also a symbol for nothingness, for where he was but is no more. Disciples are seen bowing before the container of his ashes, all that is left of the one who has successfully entered nothingness.

We shall return to a more systematic analysis of the symbolism of the stupa later in this discussion. It is enough at this point to remind ourselves that early Buddhists were as opposed to idolatry as Isaiah and the prophets. The stupa is an attempt to reveal the outlines of nothingness, for it is No Thing rather than something that lies at the heart of the tradition. The stupa is a symbol for the symbol-less.

In the caves at places like Karli, Kanheri, Ajanta, and Ellora (see Fig. 2) there are not only bas reliefs of stupas but also chaitya halls which feature imposing stone stupas as the centerpieces for veneration. The stupa is no longer a burial mound and reliquary; it is a solid stone object serving as a focus for adoration and meditation. Many such halls are round. The stupa in the center is surrounded by a circle of columns and *pradaksina* path. In Ajanta (II X,Y) and Ellora we find the *chaitya* hall now elongated, the circle having become an apse for a meditation hall.

At Karli we find another most imposing chaitya hall housing a great stone stupa (II.W.). The hemisphere of the stupa is raised up, supported by two rather high terraces decorated with geometrical designs. On top of the hemisphere is the *harmika* that, in turn, bears an inverted, truncated step pyramid. That is then topped by a traditional honorific umbrella, a sign of supreme saintliness. Similar stupas, both freestanding and in bas relief are found in the Kanheri Caves near Bombay, though here the hemisphere sometimes sits atop a square base and is surmounted by a three-tiered umbrella as well as an inverted pyramid. In any event, we find throughout the caves of this era a considerable amount of experimentation with regard to the form of stupas. The basic ingredients of the stupa remain but are treated in a variety of imaginative ways.

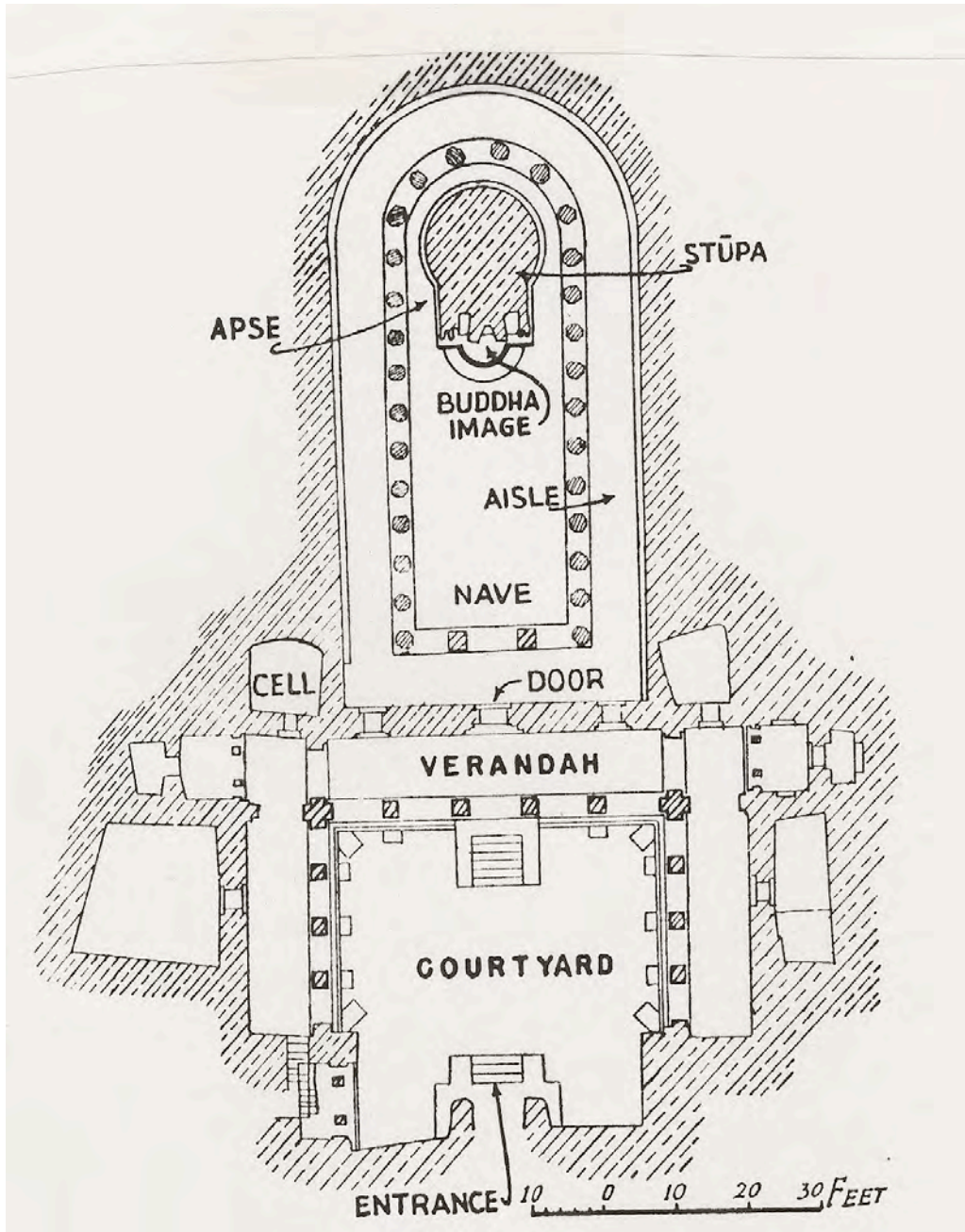


Figure 2: Ellora: rock-cut apsidal *chaitya-griha* plan

Buddhism, according to tradition at least, was carried to Sri Lanka during the time of Asoka by the Emperor's own son, Molinda. King Devanampiyatessa, the ruler at Anuradhapura was converted and, as a result, built monasteries and stupas (*dagobas*) at his capital. The account of the conversion of the king and his island may be legendary, but conversion of many Sri Lankans did take place at an early date. The Thuparama dagoba, built in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C.E., demonstrates the presence of Buddhism at that time in the capital city and exhibits the development of the stupa there. (See Figure 4 and IV. K,L.) The hemisphere now sits upon a several-tiered base and is surmounted by a square harmika with flaring top. Absent is the inverted pyramid. Instead we find a very stylized seven-tiered umbrella-cone. On top of this cone is a golden ball with its own miniature cone above. This form of stupa, with minor variations, is still being constructed in suburban Colombo (IV.B.).

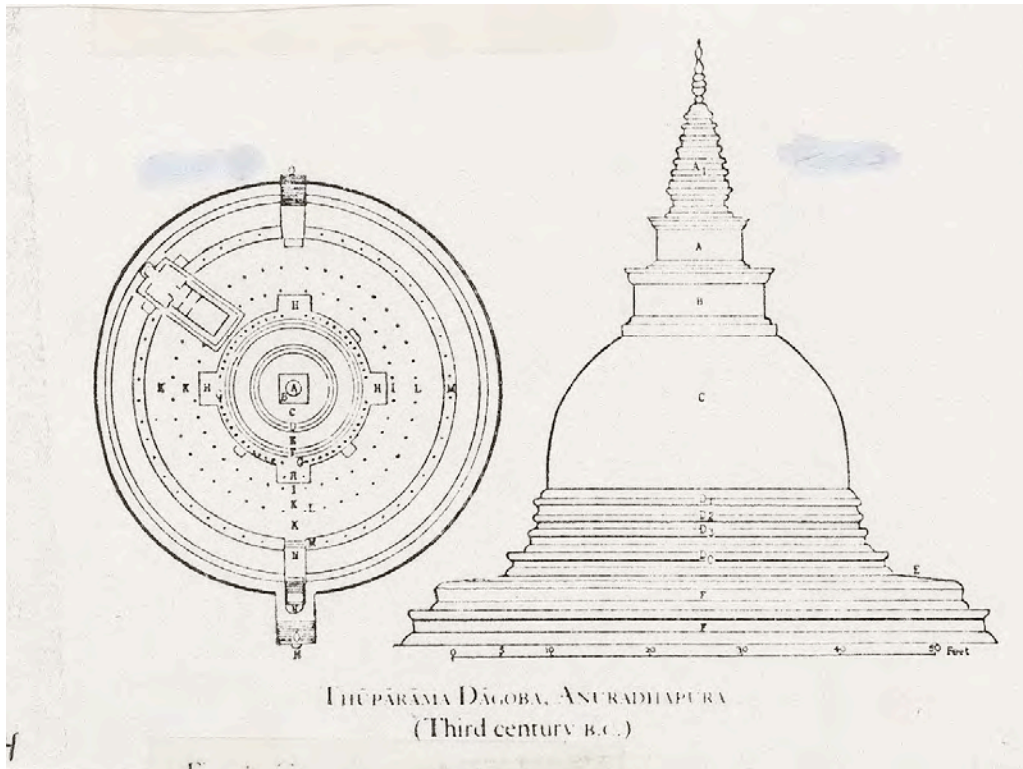


Figure 3 The Thuparama Stupa

There is one apparent variation, however, which has not been followed. Around the Thuparama stupa are circles of standing pillars that some scholars believe supported a roof covering the *pradaksinapatha*. If they are correct, the stupa must have looked like a pavilion surmounted by a dome, a little like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It may be, however, that the pillars were freestanding votive columns and did not support a roof at all. Since such columns were popular during the Mauryan Age, this theory is also quite possible.



Anuradhapura, the ancient Lankan capital, also reveals another tendency that is quite striking. Although the Thuparama *dagoba* is fairly small, the Abhayagiri is immense (IV.H.). Sir Emerson Tennant once calculated that it contains enough bricks to build a wall ten feet high and a foot thick from London to Edinburgh. Although I have neither expertise nor inclination to check his figures, anyone who has seen this edifice can testify that it is monumental in size. Somewhat smaller, but still imposing, are the Ruwanvelis (IV.E.) and the Jetavanaramaya (IV.M.) Dagobas. One senses in all these an attempt—and a successful one it was—to infuse Buddhist simplicity with royal grandeur. Curiously, the great symbol for Nothingness has become imperial.

Although Buddhism eventually succumbed to a renascent Hinduism in India, it triumphed in Sri Lanka and became India's most successful export around the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean and northward around and through the Himalayas. Hinduism was, for the most part, too Indian to take root forever among non-Indians, but Buddhism, having no Vedic ritual or caste system, was far more successful. As it spread, it carried to much of Asia its most sacred symbol, the stupa.

In Nepal, wonderfully simple stupa design from the Mauryan Age is still in evidence, but we also find at Swayambhu and Bhadgaon a Nepalese version of the ancient idea. (See Figure 4 and I. C.-F.) Essentially, the form remains; the hemisphere is preserved; as at Sanchi there is a *pradaksinapatha* both around the base and on an elevated walk partway up the *anda*. A large, square *harmika* supports a cone shaped *chatra* that reaches skyward. At Swayambhu the cone is twelve-tiered and bears an honorific umbrella above.

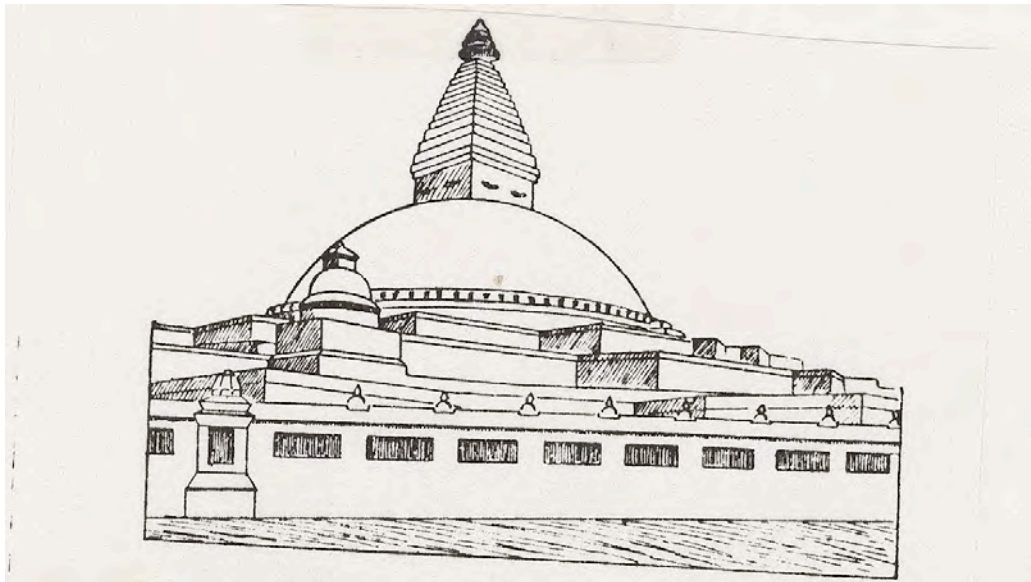


Figure 4 The Nepali Swayambhu stupa

The Nepalis have also added their own special touches that, though invented elsewhere, have become their hallmarks. The lower *pradaksinapatha* is graced by a circle of large prayer wheels, one of the foremost Himalayan contributions to spiritual technology (I. E.). As the pilgrims circumambulate they spin the prayer wheels, sending out innumerable prayers to the divine powers. On each side of the *harmika* is also painted a pair of eyes, reminding the viewer that the stupa is, among other things, a representation of the Cosmic Man (I. F.). Those eyes give to the stupa a wholly new cast, for suddenly what was essentially a geometric shape receives life. The circumambulator senses the great paradox that the burial tumulus itself is very much alive.

Buddhism also spread eastward beyond the Bay of Bengal, among the Burmese. Here too the stupa became popular as is evidenced by the medieval capital of Bagan where literally thousands of stupas, big and small, are still in evidence (III. F.-I.). The Burmese stupa retains the basic Indian form but pursues some tendencies already developing in Buddhism's homeland. At Sarnath the old Mauryan stupa was enclosed in a new form. Although today the facing and harmika are missing, it is clear that the rebuilders of the Dharmarajika felt impelled to thrust the stupa upward (II.R.). The hemisphere is still there but now surmounts a rather high base that lifts it far above ground level.

This is true of many Burmese stupas too. The base has grown much higher and the transition between base (*medhi*) and hemisphere (*anda*) cone (*chatra*) is smoothed out to create, for all intents and purposes, one great, cone-shaped form. The contrast between *anda* and *harmika*, so important for some symbolic interpretations, is virtually erased.

Most stupas, including the aforementioned Dharmarajika at Sarnath, are solid structures or, at least, are not enterable. Architects did experiment with various ways of constructing the stupa which included building supporting walls of dharma-wheel or swastika shape within the stupa, but the stupa remained an object to be viewed and venerated from without. At Bagan, however, some of the large stupas actually have a *pradaksinapatha* within them. Certain modern stupas in Yagon (Rangoon) follow this pattern, containing inside as well a display of valuable offerings—Buddha images, etc.—that have been made to the controlling monastery.

Perhaps the most famous of all the variations upon the stupa theme is found not in India or even Burma but on the island of Java in Indonesia. Borobudur, with its many levels and subsidiary stupas is stupa building carried to its ultimate symbolic extreme. (V.B.-F.) This structure is composed of eight terraces, six square and three circular, which together with the central stupa form a great symbolic mountain. The lower levels are surrounded by corridor-like ambulatories with high walls. These walls are lavishly decorated with reliefs and Buddha figures.



With level seven one enters the open air again. On the last three circular levels one finds small, open stupas, some 72 in number. There are 32 on level seven, 24 on level eight, and 16 on level nine. In the center, atop the terraces rises the main stupa in traditional form. We shall return to this great monument later in our discussion. It suffices to say here that Borobudur indicates clearly the symbolic intent of the stupa in general. In circumambulating it, one both traverses the levels of the Buddhist cosmos, ascending gradually toward heaven, and acts out the spiritual journey from the outer darkness (where the unenlightened live) to the center.

Because the stupa so dominates Buddhist architecture and religious expression in south and southeast Asia, developments in China and Japan come as something of a shock. It is true, as we have seen, that there are many variations upon the basic stupa theme. The *medhi* (base) is sometimes very simple, sometimes many-leveled. The *anda* (hemisphere) at times becomes almost cylindrical, at times cone-shaped. The *harmika* takes a variety of forms; the *chatra* varies from a simple umbrella to a complex, many-tiered cone. Nevertheless, whether in India or Sri Lanka or Indonesia, these elements are almost invariably present in one form or another.

In China, Korea, and Japan, however, this is not the case. Although there are examples of the Indian and Tibetan stupa in China, the great hemisphere which dominates the Mauryan stupa, for the most part, disappears, leaving only the *harmika* and *chatra* to form the essentials of what is called the pagoda.<sup>6</sup> (VI.B.) Why this should be the case is difficult to determine. It is not as though the standard form was imported and then gradually altered to suit local needs. As early as the Six Dynasty period (222-589 C.E.), we find the pagoda already in existence in China. The *anda* is simply missing. Indian caves are full of stupa images and bas reliefs, but we look in vain for such emphasis in the caves of Dunhuang and Mai Chi Shan. It is as though the Chinese found the Indian image distasteful and replaced it with a radically altered version of their own.

Since it is the tumulus that is missing and since Chinese cemeteries are full of tumuli, one might speculate that somehow the thought of making a grave the central image of the faith was offensive to the Chinese mind. Therefore, the earth itself became the *anda* and the *chatra*, now sometimes made of wood, sometimes of stone, became the whole image. (See Figure 5)

The *chatra*, on the Indian stupa, is a long pole plunged deeply into the *anda*. On it are suspended the levels of the cone and/or the honorific umbrella (VII D., E.). The Japanese wooden pagoda is made precisely the same way. Dietrich Seckel says,

The most important single feature of the Japanese wooden pagoda is the central or 'heart' pillar ... This pillar resembles a huge mast, resting upon a foundation stone sunk deep into the earth. Its chief

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<sup>6</sup> Pagoda is related etymologically to dagoba that in turn comes from gharba meaning womb.

function is to support the very high ... and very heavy bronze finial, to take the weight off the finely articulated wooden structure, and to insure that it is borne by the foundation stone.<sup>7</sup>

The various levels of the pagoda, then, encircle this central pillar but are not actually connected to it.

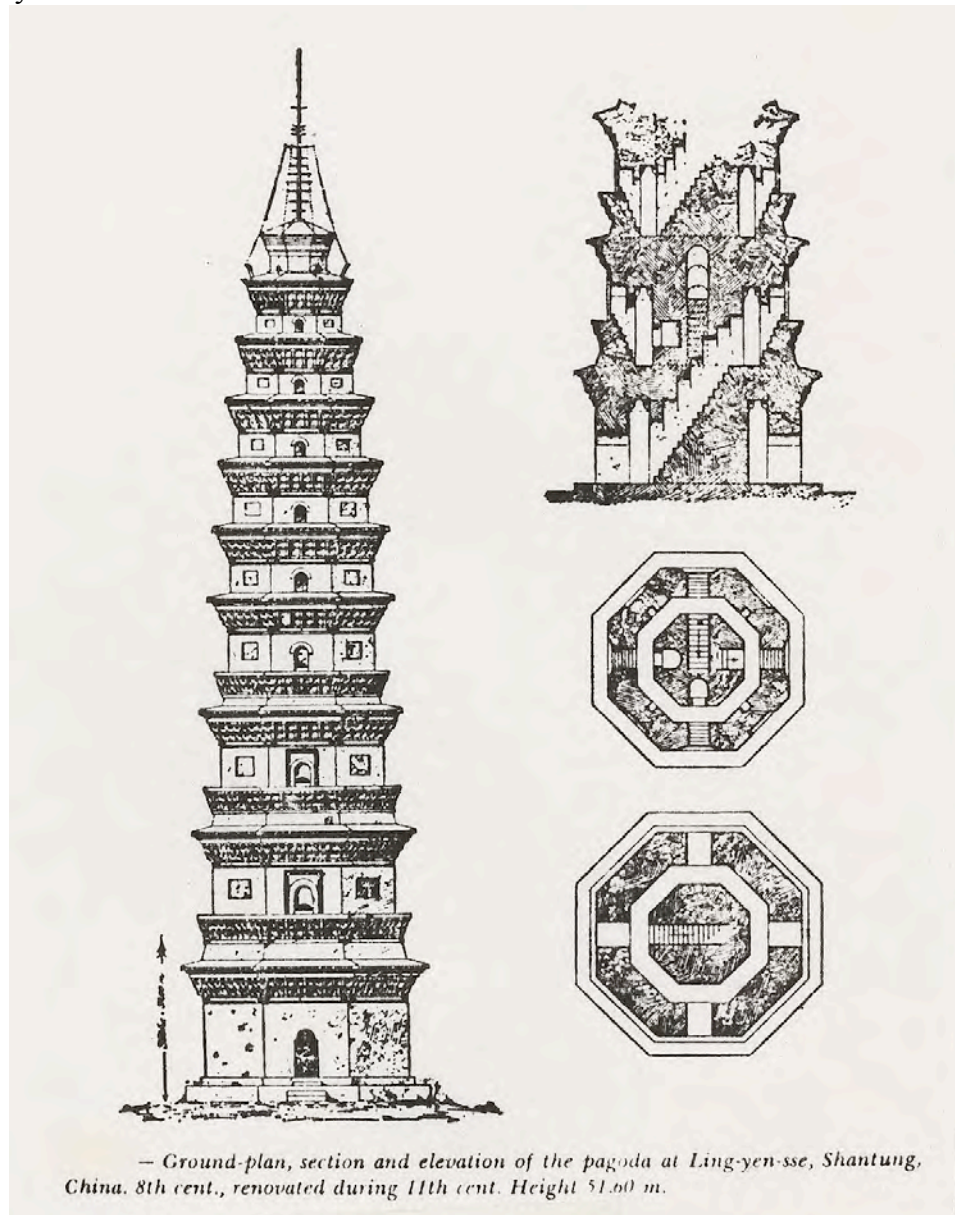


Figure 5: Pagoda at Ling Yen Si

Chinese pagodas also sometimes have this central pole. Instead of simply circumambulating the base, however, the Chinese worshipper can often climb the steps from story to story until the very top is reached (VI. B., C.). As at Borobudur, the pagoda

<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1964), 122.

in this form symbolizes the ascent to heaven in both a cosmic and a spiritual sense. The climb is an acting out of the whole Buddhist life.

In some cases, the pole is missing on the lower levels but is replaced by a Buddha image set within an empty shaft. That is, the Buddha image itself serves as the *axis mundi*, that link between heaven and earth so universally found in human religion. On the top of the pagoda one still finds the pole, usually displaying stylized, honorific umbrellas.

In China and, to a lesser extent, Japan, pagodas come in a great variety of styles. Some are of wood; some, of masonry; some, of stone. Some have central poles, some do not. Some have as few as three tiers of roofs; some have more than thirteen stories. Nevertheless, despite the variety, the pagoda is as consistent a form in China, Korea, and Japan as the stupa is in India. Behind the diversity there is great uniformity of design and function. Somehow, no Buddhist monastery or sacred compound would be quite complete without one. The pagoda is the signature of Buddhist presence.

Before turning to the meaning of such symbols in South and East Asia, there is still one more variant on the stupa form that appears in such separated areas as Tibet and Japan. This is what the Tibetans call a *chorten* and the Japanese, a *gorinto*. The chorten is found everywhere in Tibet, as a marker for the graves of lamas and other holy persons, as a shrine for sacred Scripture, as a marker for a pilgrim route. As with many other things Tibetan, the chorten is an Indian idea developed in a very schematized and philosophical way. Later in this discussion we will deal with the Tibetan interpretation of the *chorten*. It is enough simply to look at the basic structure at this point (see figure 6) and to comment that the Tibetans, though following an Indian outline, emphasize much more than the Indians the geometric variety (square, circle, triangle, etc.) and how these forms correlate with the basic elements, colors, and levels of the cosmos.

The Japanese *gorinto* is of very much the same form and undoubtedly is derived from a common source. In Japan the *gorinto* is used primarily as a reliquary and is seldom, if ever, found in architectural form.<sup>8</sup> In Tibet it is almost impossible to miss seeing the *chorten* in some form or other. In Japan the *gorinto* is not unfamiliar but is much less commonly seen, though variations of it are found as sepulchral monuments, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> Seckel, *op cit.*, p. 126.

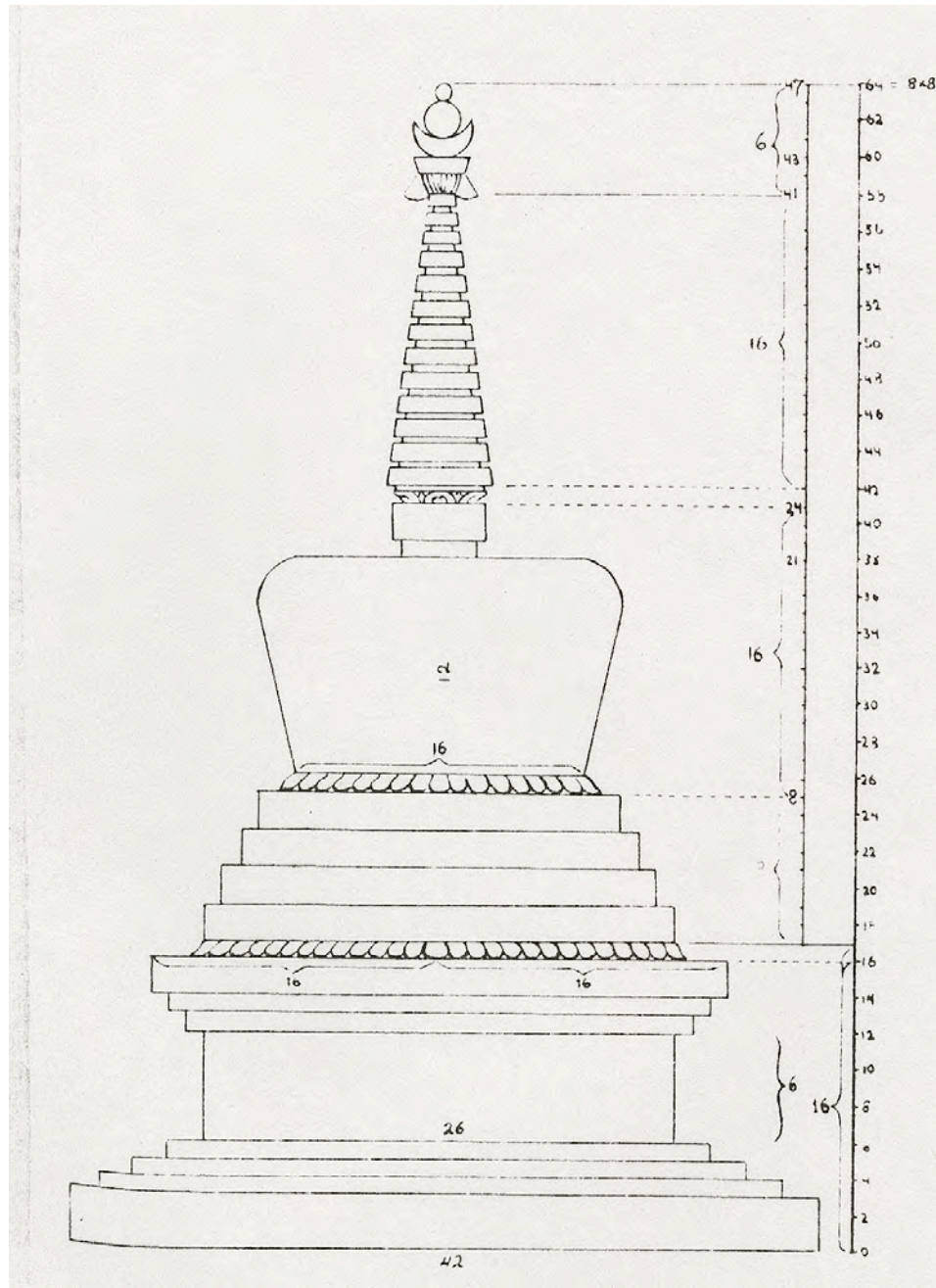
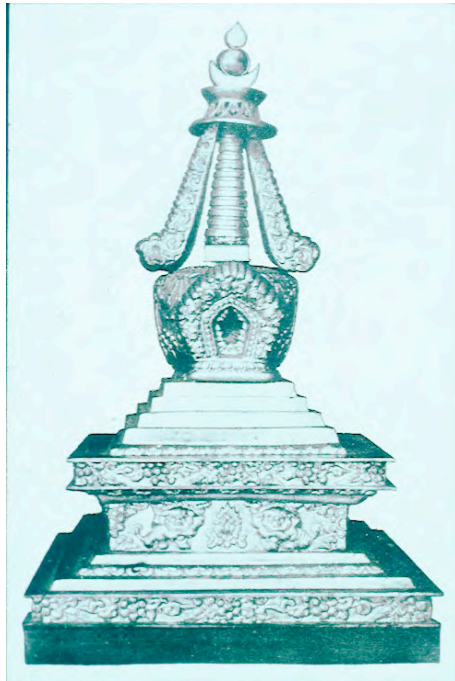


Figure 6 Cross section of the Tibetan stupa or chorten



Two variations on the chorten form:



### **The Stupa and its Symbolism**

A symbol is not invented; it is discovered. It does not bear a specific meaning but evokes interpretation so that human beings find meaning in it. As they do so, the symbol is often revised and embellished to express better the meaning that they see. In the process, the symbol can be virtually destroyed, for when a symbol is taken to mean one thing and one thing alone, it becomes but a religious or philosophical cipher. It can then be discarded in favor of the cognitive meaning it supposedly bears.

Nevertheless, genuine symbols know the way of resurrection. Just when they appear moribund, they cast off the meaning imposed upon them and appear anew, to elicit a different meaning for a new age. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, one of the great, perennial symbols, the swastika, was virtually destroyed for the Western world by the meaning imposed upon it by the Nazis. Even now it lies buried under the weight of guilt. We may expect, however, that as those memories fade the old symbol will reemerge, not as a sign of the "superior race," but with a call for new interpretation.

When we speak about the symbolism of the stupa, we must be careful to avoid the implication that the stupa in and of itself means anything in particular. It is salutary to remember that the Buddha himself, in the *Digha Nikaya*, said only that the stupa would produce a sense of calmness and happiness in the observer.<sup>9</sup> The stupa, however, has evoked a variety of interpretations and systems of interpretation and these we must look

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<sup>9</sup> Davids, *Dialogues with the Buddha*, II, 156.

at, with the full understanding that in this age or the next it may yet again call forth new responses.

As we have already said, the Buddhist stupa began its career as a burial mound, as a great tumulus to honor the Buddha or one of his followers. Tradition, however, distinguishes four types of stupa:

1. A *shariraka*. An actual sepulcher to house the remains of the Buddha or other holy person.
2. A *paribhogika*. A stupa erected over an implement, e.g. the begging bowl, of the Buddha.
3. A *uddesika*. A stupa which commemorates a sacred place, usually associated with the life of the Buddha.
4. Votive stupas. Usually small in size, erected by pious believers in order to express their faith and obtain holy merit."<sup>10</sup>

In a sense, then, the stupa can be understood simply as a sign to indicate where something historical happened and to honor that event. Here the Buddha was born; here is a bit of his ashes; here, his begging bowl is ensconced.

It would appear, nevertheless, that almost from the beginning Buddhists invested the stupa with more imaginative meaning than that, for the hemisphere soon came to be called the *anda* or egg. Alternatively, it was named the *gharba* or womb. The latter term is the source for the Lankan *dagoba* and, from that, the East Asian pagoda.

To call the great hemisphere the egg or the womb is, of course, to elicit a whole range of symbolic meanings, for both terms are connected biologically and heuristically with the reality of birth and new life. A fertilized egg is the source from which life emerges. The name "*anda*" transforms the past, dead world into a symbol for present and future hope.

This is particularly true since the relic buried within this egg-womb is called *bija* or seed. The imagery to the outsider, at least, seems obviously sexual. This mound is no dreary, unfertilized egg destined for some cosmic omelet. The egg has been fertilized by the potent seed of the Buddha. Or rather, the egg has been penetrated by that final proof that the ego of the Enlightened One has been destroyed, that the self has been conquered, that the Buddha-to-be has crossed over. The hope that is to be born is formed from the union of Something and No Thing and illustrates the teaching that *samsara* (i.e. the world of change and illusion) and *nirvana* (sometimes known as the Buddha mind) are one.

Thus, the stupa, like the Hindu *lingam* and the Christian cross is a symbol expressing the union of opposites. Here life and death, *samsara* and *nirvana*, Being and No Thingness become one. As one circumambulates the stupa, keeping it always on the right, one honors both the Buddha's presence and his absence, both this life and *nirvana*.

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<sup>10</sup> Mitra, *op. cit.*, 21-22.

The historical is not denied. In fact, the stupa, in one sense, glorifies the historical. This is the place, the ash, the implement. But the historical is transformed by the infusion of the seed of nothingness into the womb of the world. The historical pales before the conquest of the self, before the realization that the Enlightened One has conquered and overcome. The seamless robe of this earthly life has been ripped asunder by one who has crossed over and who beckons for others to try.

The sexual imagery is heightened even more by that great pole which penetrates the *anda* and which forms the support for the *chatra* cone. Here, quite visibly before us, is the union of opposites, the fusion of the circle and the eternally straight, of earth and heaven, of the physical and the spiritual. Within the precincts of the monastic community, dedicated to the celibate Middle Path, stands a revelation of that inner world where sperm fertilizes egg and where new life bursts into being.

The monks relinquish that life of sexuality that perpetuates the endless round of birth and death to find a higher species of fertilization. The union they seek is not that of ordinary seed penetrating ordinary egg but is a union on a transcendent spiritual plane. In meditation and in the whole spiritual life, the aim is to promote the union of something and no thing through following the Middle Path. It is the unspeakable which makes the speakable possible.

The symbol of the *anda* or egg also, of course, elicits cosmogonic connotations, for all over the world, the egg has been taken to be a symbol for the cosmos as an organized whole. In the book of Genesis, for instance, the world is conceived as a great egg floating in the midst of the primal waters. Outside is chaos; within is to be found organized life.

God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water." God made the firmament and it separated the water which was below the firmament from the water which was above the firmament. And it was so. (Gen. 1:6-8)

The whole human drama, for the Bible, takes place within this bubble of space, protected by the firmament from the chaos without. Below is a diagram of the Babylonian view of the cosmos from which the Bible drew so much.

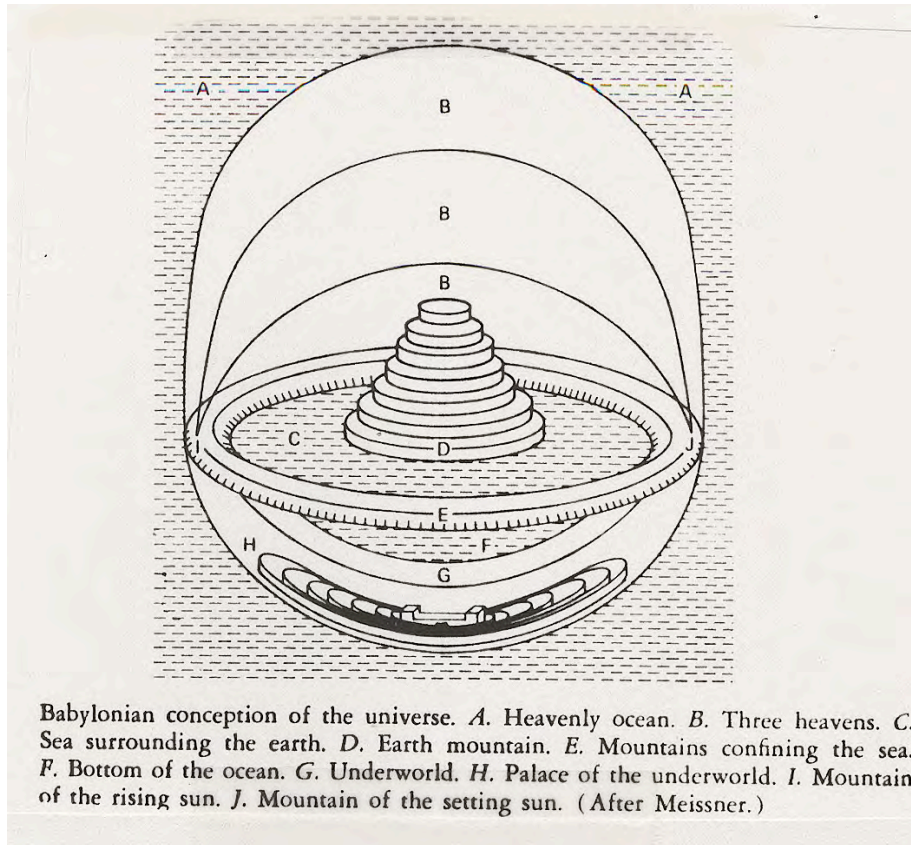


Figure 7: The traditional cosmos

Here we see the egg and its interior. Above are the realms of heaven, below, the palaces of hell. Humans, however, live in between on an island surrounded by water in the center of the egg. That island is a graduated mountain with its peak touching the lower heavens,. It is enough to say at this point that we find in this picture the essence of much traditional cosmology. In virtually every corner of the globe we find the three storied universe with its sacred mountain ringed in by an ocean. It is intimated on the back of Chinese mirrors from the Han dynasty, danced out by Amerindians, struggled with by early scientists, symbolized by the Indian *brahmananda*.

Just why human beings have been so consistent in their traditional cosmologizing is an interesting psychological and philosophical question. One could argue that the egg shape is natural because we see a blue hemisphere called sky over our heads. This obviously is the firmament of old, the inside of the Cosmic Egg. Optical illusion, however, does not account for either the view that the earth is surrounded by water or that we live on land that rises to a mountain peak in the very center of the earth. Few people (excluding those who inhabit volcanic islands) experience the world in this way. In fact, human societies have often had to reconstruct reality, building a central mountain in the form of a pyramid or ziggurat, to make the world conform to the cosmic picture myths provide.

Carl Jung and his followers would say that this is because the human unconscious contains an archetypal landscape which we know through dreams and visions and which has shaped our conscious understanding of the world. Ancient humans did not fully know



that sturdy barrier between this world of sight and that world of dream that so defines our existence. For them, reality was not just sense experience as opposed to hallucination. In fact, they were likely to interpret their sense experience according to the world of archetypes rather than vice versa.

Although I am in no position to make a judgment about Jung's psychological formulation, his basic argument is, at least, suggestive and does deal with problems of religious epistemology that others gloss over. The rather consistent view of the cosmos as an egg that has dominated traditional cultures demands some sort of explanation that transcends an appeal to sense experience.

An interesting variation on the Cosmic Egg theme appears in the Hindu *Vamana Saramahatmya*.

Long ago when all things animate and inanimate were lost in one dreadful ocean there appeared a large egg, source of the seed of all creatures. Lying in this egg, Brahma went to sleep. At the end of a thousand ages he awoke.

Awake and knowing creation to be lost in this flood, the lord broke open the egg. From it OM was born; then arose Bhuh, matchless Bhuvah and third, the sound Svah. Together they are known as Bhur-Bhuvah-Svah. From this arose *tejas* (which is *tat savitur varenyam*). *Tejas*, escaping from the egg, evaporated the water. When the residue had been dried up by *tejas* it became an embryo. The embryo, called a bubble, became solid. It is known as *dharani* because of its hardness and because it is the sustainer of all creatures. The place where the egg rested is lake Samnihita. That which first came forth from *tejas* they call Aditya. Brahma, Grandfather of the world, arose in the middle of the egg. The placenta is known as Mt. Meru, the afterbirth is the mountains, and the waters of the womb are the oceans and the thousand rivers. The water which surrounds the navel of Brahma is Mahat, and by this choice pure water is the great lake filled. In the middle of it, O great-minded one, a banyan tree stood like a pillar. From it sprang the classes: brahmins, ksatriyas, vaisyas and sudras, who thus arose to do reverence to the twice-born.<sup>11</sup>

In this myth the egg is broken open, but in fact the themes are the same. The yolk now becomes the sphere with Brahma as the focal point; the placenta becomes Mt. Meru, the great peak in the center of the world; the waters of the womb, the surrounding oceans. Also in the center is another familiar symbol, the great tree that is found everywhere in human mythology and to which we will return shortly. Characteristically, this Indian

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<sup>11</sup> Cornelia Dimmitt and J. A. B. van Buitessen, *Classical Hindu Mythology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 32.

myth finds the tree of life to be the source, not of immortality or illumination, but of the caste system, i.e. the “perfect” ordering of human society.

A myriad of other examples of the Cosmic Egg could be given, but two will have to suffice. The first comes from the Hellenic world and is a product of Orphism:

### The Orphic Creation Myth

In the beginning time created the silver egg of the cosmos. Out of this egg burst Phanes-Dionysus. For them (the Orphics) he was the first god to appear, the firstborn, whence he early became known as Protogonos. He was bisexual and bore within him the seeds of all gods and men. He was also the creator of heaven and earth, of the sun, the stars, and the dwelling of the gods. The sixth Orphic hymn, dated to be sure in the Christian era but preserving old elements, represented him in epic hexameters:

O mighty first-begotten, hear my prayer,  
Twofold, egg-born, and wandering through the air;  
Bull-roarer, glorying in thy golden wings,  
From whom the race of Gods and mortals springs.  
Ericapaeus, celebrated power,  
Ineffable, occult, all-shining flower.  
'Tis thine from darkness mists to purge the sight,  
All-spreading splendor, pure and holy light;  
Hence, Phanes, called the glory of the sky,  
On waving pinions through the world you fly.

Phanes first created his daughter Nyx, the Night; in his bisexual quality, he was her father and mother at once. With Nyx, who alone was privileged to behold him, Phanes at vast intervals of time begat Gaea, Uranus, and Cronus, who after Uranus became lord of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Here the themes of mountain and tree are missing but we do find the egg-born bisexual God whom we will meet in different form in the person of Siva.

The second, somewhat longer myth comes from the Shinto traditions of Japan.

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<sup>12</sup> Charles H. Long, *Alpha* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 127-29.

## A Japanese Creation Narrative

Of old, Heaven and Earth were not yet separated, and the In and Yo not yet divided. They formed a chaotic mass like an egg, which was of obscurely defined limits, and contained germs. The purer and clearer part was thinly diffused and formed Heaven, while the heavier and grosser element settled down and became Earth. The finer element easily became a united body, but the consolidation of the heavy and gross element was accomplished with difficulty. Heaven was therefore formed first, and Earth established subsequently. Thereafter divine beings were produced between them.

The seventh generation consisted of two deities, Izanagi and Izanami. It is with them that Japanese myth really begins, all that precedes being merely introductory and for the most part of comparatively recent origin.

Izanagi and Izanami stood on the floating bridge of Heaven, and held counsel together, saying "Is there not a country beneath?" Thereupon they thrust down the "Jewel-Spear of Heaven" (Ame no tama-boko) and groping about with it, found the ocean. The brine which dripped from the point of the spear coagulated and formed an island which received the name of Onogoro-jima or the "Self Coagulating Island." The two deities thereupon descended and dwelt there. Accordingly they wished to be united as husband and wife, and to produce countries. So they made Omogoro-jima the pillar of the center of the land.

The two deities having descended on Onogoro-jima erected there an eight fathom house with an august central pillar. Then Izanagi addressed Izanami, saying: "How is thy body formed?" Izanami replied, "My body is completely formed except one part which is incomplete." Then Izanagi said, "My body is completely formed and there is one part which is superfluous. Suppose that we supplement that which is incomplete in thee with that which is superfluous in me, and thereby procreate lands." Izanami replied, "It is well." Then Izanagi said, "Let me and thee go round the heavenly august pillar, and having met at the other side, let us become united in wedlock." This being agreed to, he said, "Do thou go round from the left, and I will go round from the right." When they had gone round, Izanami spoke first and exclaimed, "How delightful! I have met a lovely youth." Afterwards he said, "It was unlucky for the woman to speak first." The child which was the first offspring of their union was the Hiruko (leech-child),

which at the age of three was still unable to stand upright, and was therefore placed in a reed-boat and sent adrift.<sup>13</sup>

This time all does go on within the Cosmic Egg. No mention is made here of the mountain, though that figures prominently in other Japanese mythology. Reference is made, however, to the great pillar that obviously serves an *axis mundi*. It is through the circumambulation of the pillar that the god and goddess unite and produce offspring. Typically Japanese is the notion that evil entered the world through a breach of etiquette.

All of these variations on this theme add to our appreciation of the wealth of meaning to be derived from the stupa as *anda*. The stupa, in this respect, is the cosmos of miniature and, at the same time, the egg from which divine power springs. Indeed, the *chatra* which transcends the *anda* reveals the springing power. On the one hand, the levels of the *chatra* are the levels of heaven, the spiritual realms from which the buddhas come and to which the holy ones go. The *chatra* reveals that earth is not simply a self-contained, mechanistic whole but points beyond itself to the spiritual realms. We have in the stupa a visual symbol of Heaven transcending Earth. The *chatra* also reveals the steps and stages humans must pass through on their way to enlightenment. The whole is both cosmological and "spiritological." The *chatra* is the image of the cosmic egg cracking open, releasing new life into a heavenly realm.

The meeting point of the *chatra* and the *anda* is the *harmika*, usually a square platform resembling, particularly in early versions, an altar where sacrifices are offered. This, too, is important, for Buddhism emphasizes, not bloody sacrifice, but the sacrifice of ego. Or rather, the recognition that the ego or self is an illusion that must be dispensed with before enlightenment is possible. The *harmika* is that altar upon which the human lays aside his or her egotism and, thereby, ascends out of this world, the self-contained egg. The *harmika* is the link between earth and heaven, the physical and the spiritual, *samsara* and *nirvana*. It is a sign that in Buddhist thought the doctrine of *anatta* (no self) is absolutely central.

Another image that the stupa calls to mind is, of course, the great mountain in the center of the world. Like the image of the Cosmic Egg, the image of the great mountain is virtually universal. Sometimes it is a real mountain like Mt. Olympus or Mt. Fuji that serves as a visible illustration of the mythic peak. Sometimes, hope is expressed that what is now but a low hill will become, "in the latter days," that mountain in the center of the world.

It shall come to pass in the latter days  
that the mountain of the house of the Lord  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
and all nations shall flow to it,  
and many peoples shall come, and say:  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord."

Isaiah 2:2-3

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<sup>13</sup> Long, *op. cit.*, 147-48.

In these times Mt. Zion is but a low hill to the naked eye, nestled among hills that are even higher. But in those days, the truth shall be revealed. Mt. Zion will be seen for what it is: the great mountain in the center of the world.

So important is this mountain for human civilization that there are cases in which people have felt compelled to build the sacred mountain where there was none. In Mexico, nine miles up the Tonalá River on a tiny, swamp-surrounded islet, we find a pyramid of adobe around 150 meters across, built by the Olmecs in about 800 B.C.E. There are mountains within fifty miles of the site, but, for reasons unknown, the Olmecs went to great pains and labor to build their own holy mountain where special rites were held.<sup>14</sup>

Even more stylized mountains were built by the Mesopotamians in the form of ziggurats with stairways reaching to the heavens. Just as their cosmology described the great mountain in the center, so their cities revealed it, nestled as they were about the base of its eminence. The ziggurat was more than a pile of earth. It was a temple, a city hall, a center for public gatherings. Nevertheless, it was, as well, the great seven-storied mountain. On top was an altar where humanity, represented by the king, could become at one with the divine powers. Here too, each spring the king and queen engaged in ritual copulation to stimulate fertility for the whole land.

The stupa was and is much simpler than the ziggurat. Usually, there are no inner rooms. It is a monument, not a building. As such, it conforms particularly well to the image of the great mountain that rises heavenward. Its very simplicity calls to mind that archetypal image which humans seem to share. It is somehow so satisfying, so "right." There is the mountain and the altar and the tree of life.

The *chatra*, as we have already seen, went through considerable metamorphosis during the history of the stupa. Some believe it began as an actual tree, an offspring of the Buddha tree. Soon, however, it became an honorific umbrella with one to three levels. Stupa #2 at Sanchi reveals the simplest pattern: a single pole with one honorific umbrella above (I.I.N.). In later stupas the tiers became many, sometimes forming together a cone that is overtly designated a tree. Then, on top of this tree, we find once more the umbrella in somewhat smaller form.

Those who have read widely in world mythology will be immediately struck by the predictability and aptness of the development of the tree imagery, for like the Cosmic Egg and the Great Mountain, the Tree of Life is a virtually universal image. In tribal cultures it often is or is next to the central pole of the communal but which the shaman climbs to achieve entry into heaven.

Of the living quarters of the Makiritare of Venezuela Wilbert writes:

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 104ff.

The communal house represents a miniature of the Makiritare macrocosmos. The roof is the heavenly vault supported by a major cross-beam—the Milky Way. The central pole is the *axis mundi*, the axis of rotation for the celestial dome. The shaman sits at the foot of the center pole, the center of the universe. From this point, he "ascends" the world axis through eight successive heavens (each of which is marked off with onoto on the central pole) to reach the world of Wanadi above. The Sacred Monkey made a similar ascent when he went to acquire the first bitter yucca for the Makiritare. In reality, the communal house is the cosmic center of the universe for the Makiritare. Here they dwell under the protection of Wanadi, in the shadow of the (yucca) world tree, which grows next to the central pole at the point where the heavens touch the earth.<sup>15</sup>

In the Bible, the fruit from the tree of life is the potential source for immortality.

And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden. Genesis 2:9

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"—therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. Genesis 3:22-23

The symbolism here is slightly different from that of the Makiritare, but the meaning is the same. The tree is that *axis mundi* which connects heaven and earth. Had Adam eaten of the tree of life he would have become "like god," for he would have become immortal. Because he ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil instead, immortality is denied him and he is driven from the garden where the tree of life is located. As the New Testament makes clear, in the Christian myth that lost possibility is made available once more when Jesus hangs upon the tree of life and, through his death, opens the gates to Paradise. This he does in Jerusalem, "on" the holy mount, in the center of the world.

The list of trees in world mythology and religion that offer a way to "heaven" is enormous. We could discuss that Peach Tree of immortality which Chinese stories say grows upon the mountain of Hsi Wang Mu in Western China. Here the immortals live, eating the sacred peaches that extend life indefinitely. We could also mention the great Ash, Yggdrasil, which Nordic myth describes as having its roots in hell and its branches in heaven. This tree is, in fact, the universe; it is the whole. Its life binds all together. Its

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<sup>15</sup> Johannes Wilbert, *Survivors of Eldorado* (New York: Praeger Pub., 1972), 138.

death will signal the end of all. There is also the great palm of the Caribs that their hero climbed with all the animals when the great flood came upon the earth. This is the tree which originally provided humanity with all its food and sustenance.

Atop the stupa grows the tree of life, calibrated with the levels through which humans ascend to reach ultimate spiritual fulfillment. At its base are the burned out remains that once were an ego-illusion. At its top an honorific umbrella signifies the monumental achievement that that relic represents. The tree, itself, is the way, the *dharma* path to enlightenment.

Seen in this way, it is no wonder that the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese have regarded the *chatra* turned pagoda as a symbol sufficient to their needs. To climb the Chinese pagoda to the top is to act out the spiritual quest; it is to circumambulate in spiral fashion the *axis mundi* itself. The Buddhist life is not just a cyclical process. It is an ascent to spiritual attainment, to enlightenment.

Most stupas, of course, do not particularly emphasize the ascent. At Sanchi the great stupa has upper and lower *pradaksinapatha* but no spiral effect. Nevertheless, the circumambulation of Sanchi also is the acting out of the Middle Way. At Sanchi there are four lavishly decorated gates or *toranas* oriented toward the four points of the compass. The worshipper can enter through any one of them to enter the way, though the main entrance originally was in the south where Asoka's great pillar was positioned. Each of the gates awakens in the pilgrim memories of the ancient tales, not only of Gautama Siddhartha, but of preceding Buddhas as well. They call the visitor to enter through them into that other world where enlightened ones and their disciples live. Around the stupa we walk upon another landscape.

Inside each of the gates is a statue of the Buddha with a specific *mudra* or hand-gesture. The four Buddhas together present the essential aspects of the Buddha's life and thought and call forth reverence from those who enter. The worshipper then proceeds around the stupa, following the path of the sun with the stupa always on the right. The true devotee will proceed several times around the lower course and then mount the steps to circumambulate several times on a higher level.

## **The Pilgrimage**

This whole process is an acting out in physical terms of the spiritual quest. Buddhism takes one to the very center of the world, to the holy mountain and the holy tree where the Enlightened One dwells in No Thingness. What the monk does in deep meditation the pilgrim does externally, in the flesh. The spiritual life is a life of quest.

Nowhere does the symbolism of the quest become more apparent than at Borobudur in central Java. Borobudur, as V.D. makes plain, is constructed like a three-dimensional mandala. The classical Buddhist mandala, as is represented in the Tibetan

mandala below usually involves a square or squares circumscribed in and circumscribing a circle. The squares, which represent the earthly, are, in Tibet at least, constructed like the floor plan of a temple. There are four porches and gateways through which one can enter. Inside the outer doors guarded by guardian deities there is a square *pradaksinapatha*. After traversing that in meditation, the meditator enters on the circular path through one of the inner doors. There, in the center of the mandala, is the Vairocana Buddha surrounded by four other Dhyani Buddhas and their consorts. This picture is meant to be a roadmap into the inner self. By following the *pradaksinapatha* with the "mind's eye" through meditation upon the picture, one can arrive at the very center of the self, the Buddha, from whom all springs.



Figure 8. Mandala of Vairocana



At Borobudur, this process is acted out in space and time. The lower levels are square and one moves around them through highly decorated aisles. Claire Holt says,

The architectural plan of the Barabudur, the Buddha images in niches above the galleries, and the themes of the reliefs are all symbolic of the monument's meaning, as is the absence of reliefs on the upper round terraces. "The ten stages of the Bodhisattva," the phases in the Buddhist Way of Salvation, are symbolized by the successively rising terraces, six square and three round, with the crowning stupa as the last phase. Stutterheim has divided these terraces into three spheres (*dhatu*). They represent the sphere of desire (*kamadhatu*) at the base, the sphere of form (*rupadhatu*) on the middle level, and the sphere of formlessness (absence of form, *arupadhatu*) at the top.

The lowest sphere, the *kamadhatu*, is symbolized by the so-called "buried foot" of the monument, the base terrace. Its outer walls have been carved with reliefs depicting the earthly existence (*karma*) of human beings in the power of desire, their good and evil deeds, and their corresponding rewards and punishments. For reasons not yet fully established, whether physical (sagging of the monument), didactic (removal of this sphere from the eyes of the meditating monks), or symbolic (closing off this sphere as unnecessary for the royal candidate to Buddhahood) this series of reliefs has been hidden from sight by a heavy mantle of stones laid around the base terrace, incidentally widening the floor for the processional path.

The "sphere of form" (*rupadhatu*), symbolized by the four galleries above the base, contains all the visible reliefs. Their content, identified in part by Krom, basically follows certain Sanskrit texts. From these and from the identification of certain figures or their contexts where texts could not be ascertained, especially on the third and fourth galleries, it is clear that as one climbs to the higher levels, the more exalted the themes become. One rises, in fact, from the lower depths of earthly existence (*karma*) depicted on the "buried base" to the highest heavens of future Buddhas.

On the first gallery of the *rupadhatu*, the upper series of panels on the main wall depicts episodes from the life of Prince Siddharta Gautama, who as a sage became known as Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. Below this series are scenes rendering the story of Prince Sudhana who became a Bodhisattva, and his beloved *kinnari* (a mythical celestial being, half-woman, half-bird), Manohara. On the balustrade side scenes from *Jataka* stories contain incidents from the previous incarnations of the Buddha. On the main wall of the second gallery the story of Bodhisattva Sudhana continues, as he visits ascetics, sages, monks, and high Bodhisattvas, worshipping at sacred places in quest of the highest wisdom. *Jataka* tales again appear on the balustrade side. Still higher, on the third and fourth galleries, there are scenes of Bodhisattvas and of ever higher

heavens with Buddha figures enthroned in serene majesty. Then all representations end and with them, the "sphere of form" is left behind."<sup>16</sup>

At last, one emerges from the square levels of form to the circular levels of formlessness. The circular terraces feature some seventy-two latticed stupas containing a Buddha image within. The lattice effect allows the pilgrim to know that the Buddha is inside, but does not afford a clear view of the image.

Finally, in the center, on the very top of the Mountain is the bell-shaped stupa that represents the very essence of the faith, a symbol for the whole. Some speculate that this stupa also contained a Buddha image, but is now missing. In any event, the stupa functions like the Buddha in the very center of the mandala, as a symbol for the object of the spiritual quest, the ultimate fulfillment of the Middle Path. The way has been one of discipline and control, but the end is freedom. This *moksha* finds its expression in the architecture itself.

No visitor to the Barabudur can help feeling a sense of release upon entering this upper sphere of the monument, where it is no longer hemmed in between the walls of the lower galleries with their profusion of representational forms. Pure space, the marvelous expanse under the dome of the sky which melts into the mountain ranges in the distance and the palm groves and rice fields below, creates a sense of extraordinary peace, the flow of infinity. He need not be a Buddhist, monk, or mystic to experience the grandeur of silence that reigns in this superb "void."<sup>17</sup>

The symbolic pilgrimage is, of course, hardly Buddhist in origin. Indeed, virtually every religion from the simplest to the most complex, knows of holy places to which believers are called to go. One thinks of Jerusalem and Varanasi, Wu Tai Shan and the Black Hills, Mecca and Canterbury. Although no two pilgrimages are exactly alike, it would seem that virtually all emphasize the journey as a return to the center. There, on the sacred mountain in the center of the earth grows the holy tree around which one walks and up which one symbolically climbs to enlightenment and freedom.

There is, as scholars such as Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade have pointed out, an isomorphism that pervades religious life and action. The themes of the tribal initiation rite—separation from ordinary society, trial and suffering, return to the center, death and rebirth—pervade also human mythology, particularly about the hero.<sup>18</sup> In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell argues quite persuasively that all heroes reenact

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<sup>16</sup> Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967); 45-47.

<sup>17</sup> Holt, *op. cit.*, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, trans. W. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1958).

all or a part of this sequence which leads from ordinary existence to rebirth with divine power and freedom.<sup>19</sup>

By the same token, the pilgrim acts out in his journey the stages that both the initiate and the hero go through. The stupa offers to those who come to it a vision of that path which leads from death to rebirth—not in this world but in no-thingness. In circumambulation one encircles both the ashes of the past, the symbol of the "Well Gone", and the tree of life that grows from this soil of death. The tree remains above, there is no easy path to the top itself, but the recognition is there. The goal is to climb the tree to the very top.

There is an old adage, "As above, so below" that once shaped human cosmological thinking. We could also add to it another motto, "As within, so without," as a saying more acceptable to our age. Everything we have mentioned so far about the stupa is only an intimation of what to the Buddhist is the central and more important reality, i.e. the inner quest. The story of the Buddha and the pilgrimage to the stupa are only ways of expressing in the world what must become an internal truth.

## The Cosmic Human

The eyes of the Nepali stupas which we have already mentioned (I.F.) are a reminder that the stupa is HUMAN, born from the Cosmic Egg.<sup>20</sup> This is the Buddha, the enlightened, perfect human being who sits before us. It is a vision of what all men and women can become. It is probably not misleading to make an equation with the traditional Western understanding of humanity. That is, the *anda* in this equation represents the body; the *harmika*, the mind; the *chatra*, the spirit. The *chatra*, then, is like the flaming topknot often seen on images of the Buddha. It is a symbol of those stages of spiritual development that lead to enlightenment. A stupa without the *chatra* is only an image of death and human sacrifice. It is the *chatra* that reveals that beyond ordinary human existence, inevitably bounded by suffering and death, is new life in the spirit. The soaring *chatra* is the sign of hope and new life pointing upward toward freedom.

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956).

<sup>20</sup> I am keenly aware that Cosmic Man sounds sexist, but the term is so widely used it is hard to avoid. Know that I use "Man" in the proper generic sense.

## Scholastic Interpretation

Scholastic Buddhists who have always loved enumeration and categorization have also had a field day interpreting the stupa as a symbol for the various ingredients of the life of enlightenment. The Tibetan *Tanjur*, taking the traditional Abhidharmic view of human nature, makes the following complicated set of equations.<sup>21</sup>

The base (*socle* or *medhi*) of the stupa in this formulation has four square terraces and one circular one which symbolize the basis for the spiritual life. Step one is *cattari satipatthanam* or mindfulness of body, sensation, mind, and phenomena. Step two is *cattari sammappadhanani* or effort—to destroy evil that has arisen and will arise and to cultivate goodness which has arisen and will arise. Step three is *cattaro eddipada* or psychic power. This can be further broken down into (1) the desire to act, (2) energy, (3) thought, 4) investigation. Step four is called *pancindriyani* and symbolizes the five faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and reason. In step five, the circular base of the hemisphere called *panca balani*, these same latent forces are transformed into active ones. Thus the fifth, circular terrace is the transition stage between the basis of the Middle path and the path itself.

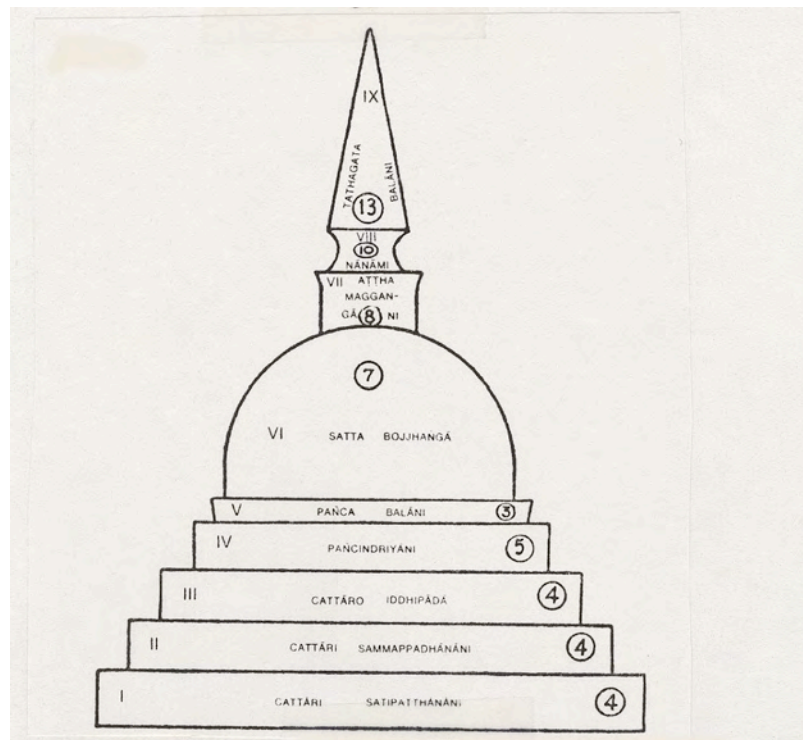


Figure 9: The symbolic stupa

<sup>21</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Psycho-cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa* (Emeryville, Ca.: Dharma Publishing, 1976), 54ff.

The *anda*, according to this formulation symbolizes the seven factors of enlightenment itself:

- |                         |                  |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1. mindfulness          | 5. serenity      |
| 2. discerning the truth | 6. concentration |
| 3. energy               | 7. equanimity    |
| 4. rapture              |                  |

The *harmika*, in its turn, corresponds to the eight-fold path, i.e.:

- |                      |                        |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. right views       | 5. right livelihood    |
| 2. right aspirations | 6. right effort        |
| 3. right speech      | 7. right mindfulness   |
| 4. right action      | 8. right concentration |

The stem of the tree of life corresponds to the tenfold knowledge (of the law, of other person's thoughts, of relations, of empirical knowledge, of suffering, of things connected with despair, of the non-production of things). On the stem of the *chatra* are also thirteen layers corresponding to thirteen mystical powers.

In a sense, in this very complicated academic formulation, one proceeds from the base of mindfulness, effort and psychic power upward until the mystical powers are developed. One can, however, make too much of this upward ascent because, in fact, each part (as in the human body) depends upon all the rest. An equally good case, therefore, could be made for moving from the top down, for everything, in a sense, depends upon that knowledge that comes from above. It is better, however, to avoid an easy sense of progression in either direction, for all parts depend upon all others.

Knowledge, morality, and will are interdependent. To ask which comes first is to become involved in a fruitless chicken and egg conundrum. This formulation presents the whole complex system of the enlightened life. It is no more appropriate to think that mindfulness must be developed first than it is to think that one makes an automobile by first creating the tires and setting them up.

### **The Chorten**

Still another, rather elaborate interpretation, is to be found in the Tibetan understanding of the chorten, a version of the stupa which has apparently been reshaped spatially so that the message which the interpretation offers comes clearer. In other words, in this instance, the symbol is virtually transformed into a cryptogram with a secret message.

The chorten in its most abstract form looks like this:

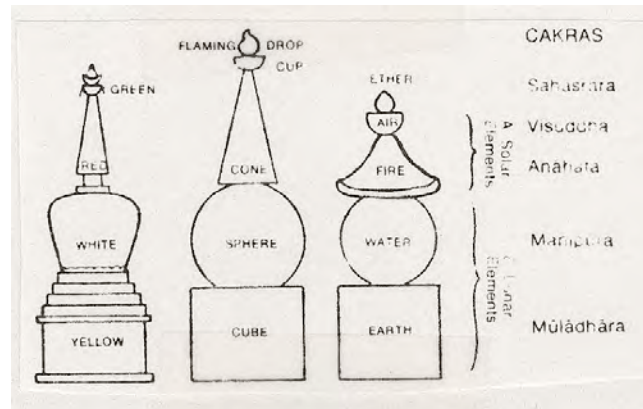


Figure 10: The Chorten

The fundamental relation to the stupa form is visually clear enough, but the transformation is also apparent. The anda becomes a sphere; the harmika disappears; the top of the cone becomes geometrically stylized.

In the interpretation of this image equations are made which relate geometrical form, color, element and what are called *chakras*. The last items, derived from *kundalini* yoga, represent circles of power located between the base of the spine and the top of the head. *Laya yoga*, is designed to draw *kundalini* power up from below the lowest chakra where it sleeps, through the various circles of power until, when it reaches the highest level, it produces ecstasy and enlightenment.

Thus, in the chorten are coordinated and equated visible form and color, cosmological elements, and stages of enlightenment. In effect, enlightenment is not so much leaving or negating the world as it is fulfilling the natural order of it. Science (cosmology) and religion are one: there is no conflict. The astronaut in his flight acts out the pilgrimage of the solitary meditator.

The fact that the cosmology used is no longer regarded as science negates, of course, the validity of the equation. Indeed, it makes the chorten appear particularly occult and superstitious and does exactly what the chorten is designed not to do. At the same time, it reveals the path which modern Buddhism—indeed, all religion—must take. It could be argued, at least, that the stupa must again be reshaped and reinterpreted so that it reveals that coordination between the spiritual life and the presently accepted cosmology. In our age, the stupa ought to be correlated, not with the five elements but with the Laws of General and Special Relativity, the Indeterminacy Principle, and Quantum Mechanics.

Such a correlation, though necessary for psychic wholeness, is also dangerous. Eventually Einstein and Heisenberg and all the other proponents of modern physics will be supplanted and yet another cosmology will come to birth. When that happens, all religious attempts to relate to physics will seem dated and, perhaps, even occult. Too close a coordination between symbol and contemporary theory can destroy, at least momentarily, the symbol.

If anything has been clear from our analysis of the stupa, however, it is that the symbol can transcend any special interpretation of it. The stupa is not the captive of any particular age or any school of Buddhism. Indeed, it transcends Buddhism itself. There is, to be sure, a sense in which the stupa is exactly the right symbol for the Buddhist tradition and vice versa. It is Buddhist in a way that it could not be either Hindu or Christian. Be that as it may, at this point, we must also observe that the stupa transcends the tradition that has used it. Buddhism, in its historical form, may some day die. Since nothing in the world is permanent, we can predict with great assurance, in fact, that Buddhism, along with all other human institutions will either die or be transformed beyond recognition. But the stupa, the symbol, in some form will live on, for it has been, is, and will be an ineffable source of power.





## Part II: Photographs

Here are photographs of stupas and pagodas from a variety of Asian countries. Most of them were taken by the author; another origin is indicated by a star:\*



A stupa near Wu Tai Shan, China.

## I. Nepal



### I. A

Since Gautama Siddhartha (the Buddha) was born in southern Nepal in a garden called Lumbini, let us begin with some pictures from that country. The first (I.A.) is a very simple, classical stupa from the time of the Emperor Ashoka (304-232 B.C.E.). Ashoka also built a temple on the hill where the Swayambhunath (Monkey Temple) now stands. (B. C. D. E.) The final picture is a modern stupa built by the Burmese at the pilgrimage site at Lumbini where the Buddha is said to have been born. Lumbini is located very near Bhairahawa (see above) on the border with India.



I. B. Ashokan Stupa in Patan, Nepal. The shape and features are of classic design.



I.C. The hill not far from Katmandu where the Swayambhu stupa stands





I.D.. The Swayambhunath surrounded by many votive stupas



I.E. The Pradaksinapatha with numerous prayer wheels. When you spin one it sends off prayers in every direction.





I.F. The eyes of the Buddha suggest that the whole stupa is his image.



I.G. The Lokamani Stupa at Lumbini, a modern building built by the Burmese at the birth place of the Buddha.\* (wikipedia)



## II.A.India



India, of course, is the place where the Buddha achieved enlightenment and taught. Perhaps the most impressive ancient stupas in India are found at Sanchi, an early Buddhist center.(II. A-M) Here the early stupas have been covered with stone, and embellished with beautiful carved stone archways. In all there are three stupas as well as the remains of an ancient *vihara* where Buddhist *bhikkhus* lived.





II. B. The hill of Sanchi

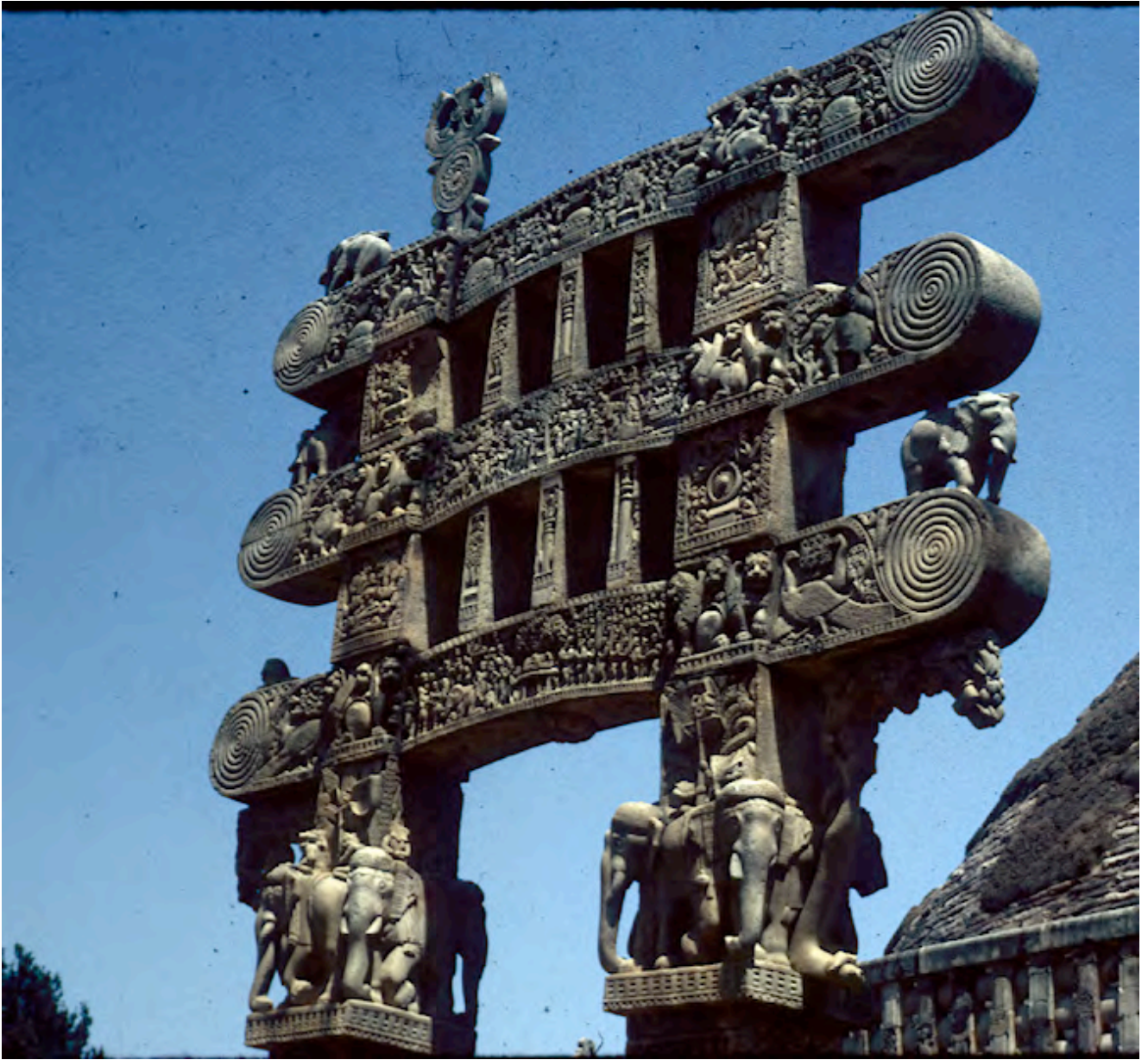


II. C. Approaching the ancient stupas of Sanchi



II.D. Stupa # 1, Sanchi





II.E. One of the great stone gateways of Stupa # 1, Sanchi

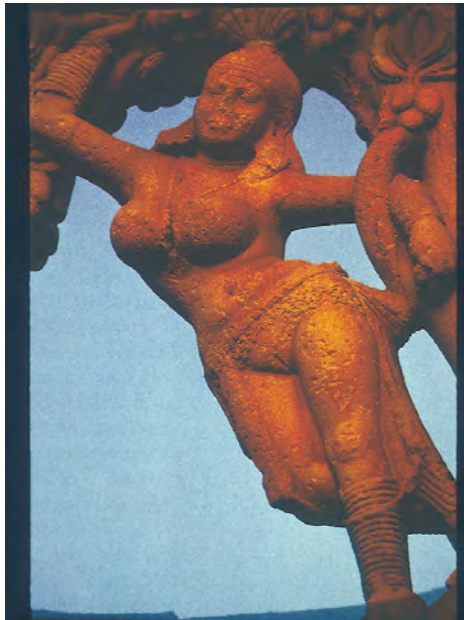
The next seven pictures are all details of the stonework. Whether the artisans were actually Buddhist is an interesting question. Often those who create religious art are not of the faith being depicted.



II. F.



II. G.



II. H.

Sanchi stone-work

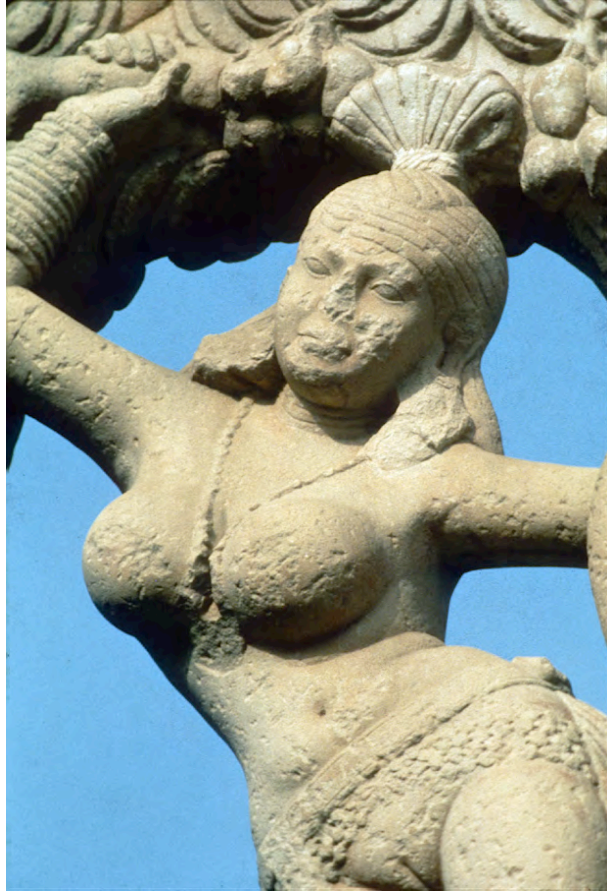




II. I In very ancient times, the Buddha was not depicted in art but was signified by empty sandals or perhaps a tree. Here we see the tree of enlightenment rather than the Buddha himself, though elsewhere at Sanchi he is depicted.



II.J. Another bodhi tree



II. K Given the Buddhist concern for controlling desire, it is a little surprising to see a nude female figure (a *yaksha*) on a holy Buddhist site. There are various theories about this, but none of them seems to me to be wholly satisfactory.

II. L







II. M At Sanchi, unlike many latter sites, the *harmika* and *chatra*, even on the largest of the stupas is very simple.



II. N. The pradaksinapatha , Stupa #1.



II. O. View from the upper patha.



II. P. This is stupa #2, Sanchi. It is smaller and simpler than # 1, having only one gate and no wall around it. The *chatra* has only one “umbrella”, though the stupa has both an upper and lower *pradaksinapatha*.

In pictures Q and R we see stupa # 3 and the *vihara* where bhikkhus once lived and worked.





II. Q Stupa #3



II. R The *vihara*



I.I.S. This is Sarnath where, according to tradition, the now enlightened Buddha taught his first five disciples and turned the Wheel of the Law for the first time. It is traditionally known as “Deer Park.” Although this stupa has undoubtedly been radically rebuilt since Ashokan times and no longer has the simple lines of the stupa at Patan, it is regarded by many as the oldest stupa still extant in India. Sarnath is very close to the great Hindu center of Varanasi.





II. T. Although the Buddha was enlightened under a *bodhi* tree at Bodhgaya, Sarnath also displays a so-called *bodhi* tree, perhaps a descendant of the original tree.





II. U. From very early times, Buddhists were intrigued by and greatly adorned caves. The Kanheri caves, not far south of Mumbai (once Bombay), are full of beautiful stone carvings and stupas. Needless to say, there is nothing contained in these stupas. They are solid stone.



II. V. Sometimes at Kanheri, stupas appear in various forms as simply decorations carved in the walls.

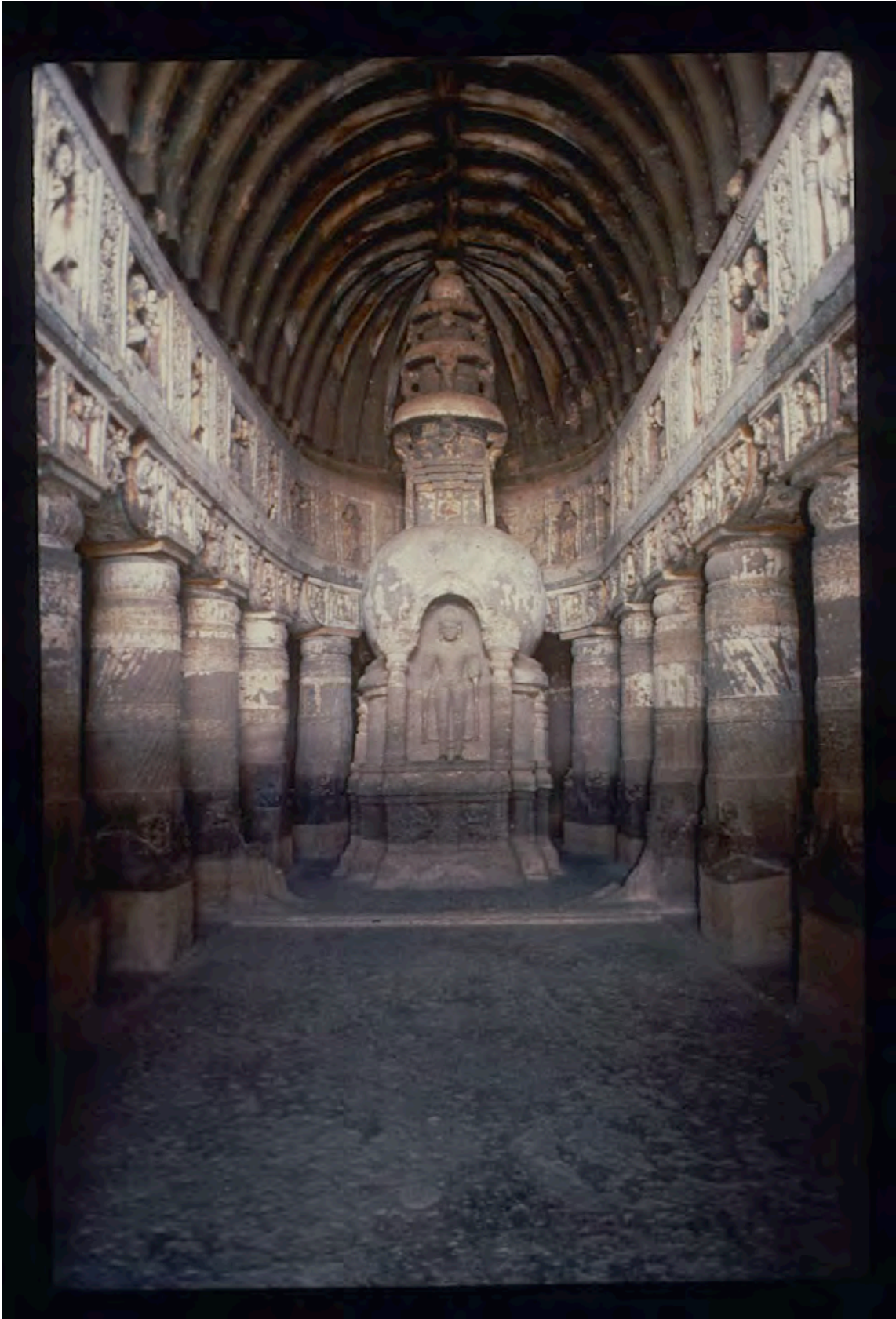


II. W At the Karla Caves, also not far from Mumbai is a *chaitya* hall with this large, free-standing stupa.\* (Wikipedia)





II. X. To the east of Mumbai (Bombay) are the caves at Ajanta and Ellora. This stupa is to be found in Cave # 10 at Ajanta. There are, in all, thirty caves at Ajanta, but only a few are *chaitya* halls. When Buddhism moved north to China, the cave tradition was continued at places like Dunhuang at the Magao caves.



II. Y. Here is another great stupa found in cave #19 at Ajanta.



### III. A. Myanmar and Thailand



III. A While Buddhism eventually lost its power in India, it blossomed in nearby Myanmar and Thailand.



III. B. Yagon (Rangoon) is the capital of Myanmar and features the great Shwedagon Pagoda. In fact, there is a whole forest of stupas that surround the great central dagoba. Here is the *pradaksinapatha* that is used daily by many worshippers. The next several pictures (C,D,E) show other scenes on the path.





III. C.



III. D





III. E.



III. F. North of Yagon, along the Ayerawady (Irrawaddy) River, is the site of Medieval Bagan (once Pagan). Today it is a veritable forest of stupas of all sizes. Many of them are fairly small votive stupas, as in the foreground, but in the distance are stupas of monumental size. The next three pictures (G, H, I) are of two of the most famous. Most stupas cannot be entered, but III. I has an entry door. Inside one can see many treasures from medieval times.





III.G. The Dhammayazika Pagoda built in 1196 C.E. in Bagan, Myanmar.



III. H. The Dhammayazika Pagoda surrounded by votive stupas.





III.I. The great Ananda Pagoda built in 1105 C.E. in Bagan. One can go inside this pagoda to view many treasures, including golden Buddhas.



III. J. Bangkok in Thailand is also the home of many, many stupas of varying sizes and shapes.



II.K. A view amidst the stupas small and large. Perhaps the most visible stupa in Bangkok is the fairly modern “Temple of the Dawn” that is next to the river and hence is visible from many directions. The next two pictures are of that pagoda.





III. L. Temple of the Dawn, Bangkok.



III.M.





IV.A Sri Lanka



IV. B. This modern stupa is found in Colombo, Sri Lanka and represents how modern Buddhism is practiced. There is a small *pradaksinapatha* with Buddha images on all four sides of the stupa (see IV. C.) Opposite these images, on the outside, are altars on which to leave offerings (see VI. D) One circumambulates as one would the Buddha, keeping the stupa on your right.



IV. C. A small Buddha image on the stupa.



IV. D. A small altar. Note the swastika, a primary Buddhist symbol.





IV. E. Anuradhapura was already in existence as the capital when the son of Ashoka brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. This is one of the many rebuilt stupas of that ancient city. The Ruwaneweli stupa is guarded by rows of elephants, now restored (see IV. F.) and is surmounted by a classic *harmika* and *chatra* (see IV. G.)





IV.F.



IV.G.



IV.H. The Abhayagiri *Dagoba*, though in ruins, is one of the largest in the world.





IV.I. Another ancient stupa under repair at Anaradhapura.



IV. J. A small stupa from the other ancient capital, Polonnaruwa.



IV. K.





IV. L. K and L are both pictures of the Thuparama stupa, probably the oldest in Sri Lanka. There is great debate about the function of the many polls that surround the stupa. Did they support a roof or were they used for some other purpose?\* (Wikipedia)



IV. M. The Jetavanaramaya Stupa, also at Anuradhapura.\* (Wikipedia)

V. Borobodur, Java



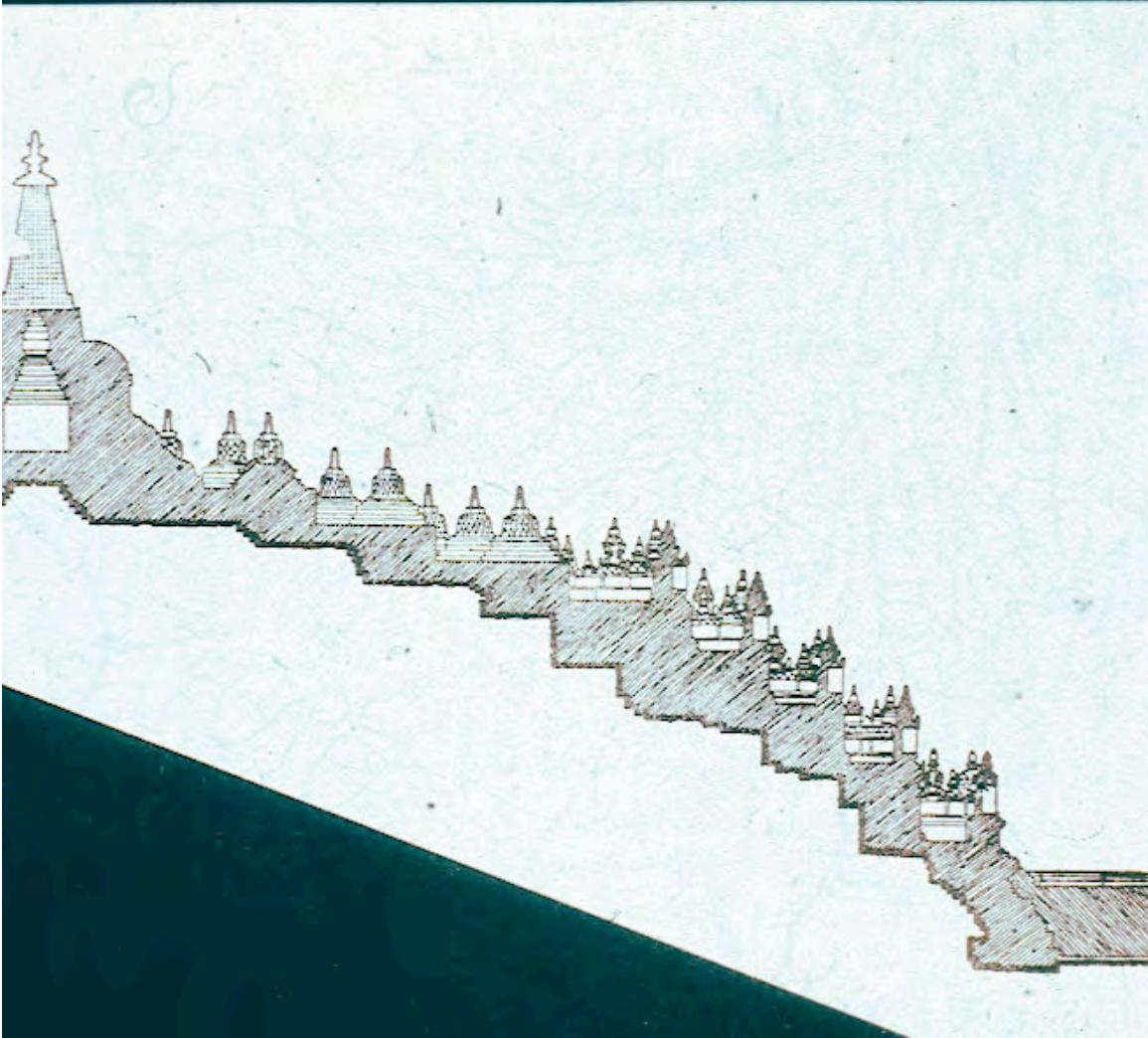
V. A, Java

Indonesia is now largely Muslim, but before the coming of Islam both Hinduism and Buddhism took root there. It was in Java that Buddhists built perhaps the most complex and beautiful of all stupas at Borobudur in the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. For centuries, however, it was virtually forgotten and has only fairly recently been renewed, now as a tourist attraction.



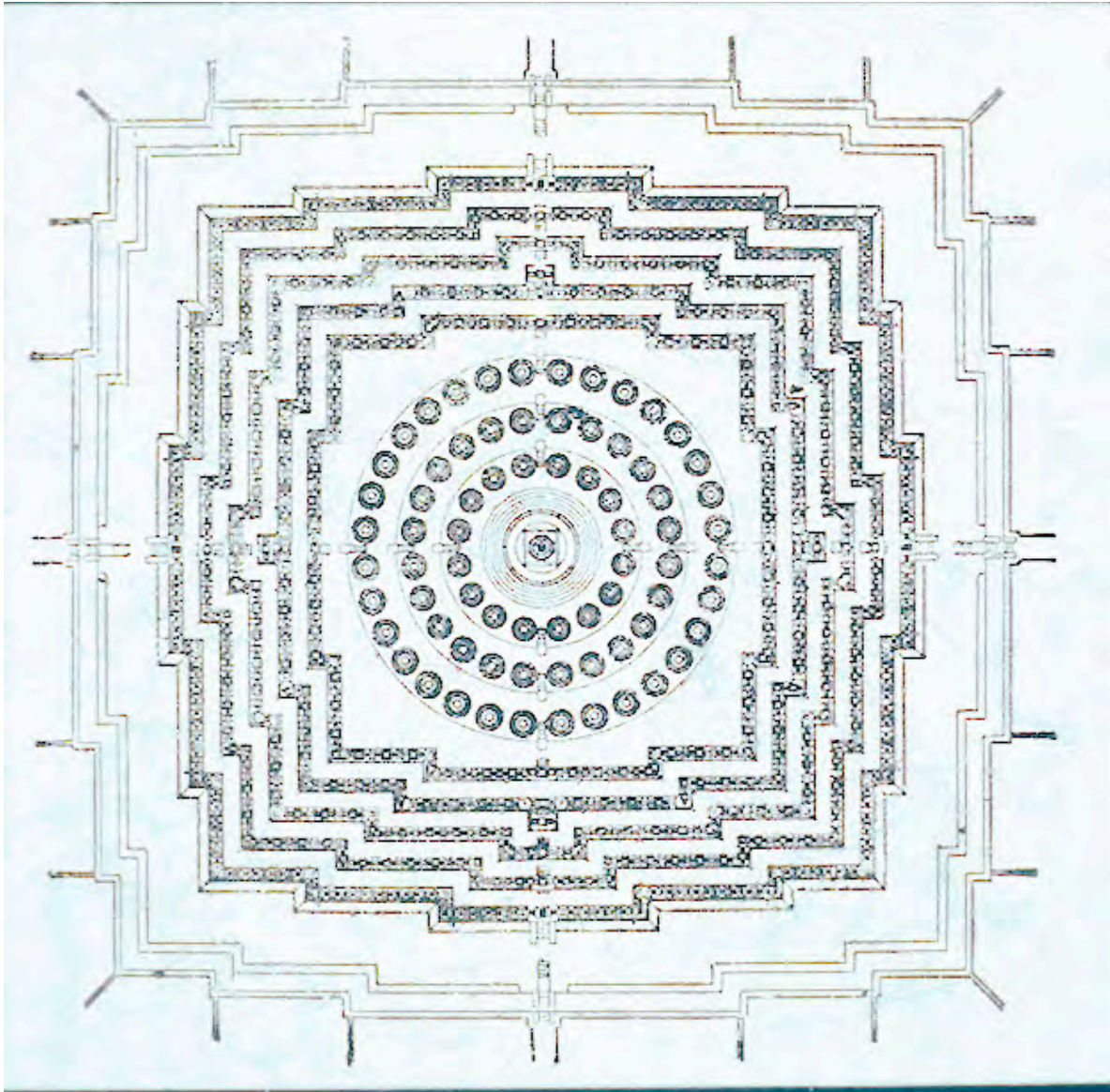
V. B. The stupa at Borobudur. As one can see from the diagrams that follow the *pradaksinapatha* is very long, rising eventually to the top that is itself the site of many smaller stupas.\* (Wikipedia)





V.C. Here is a view of the many levels of Borobudur. The first levels are covered and hence quite dark. They concentrate on images of karma and its effects. Then the life of the Buddha is portrayed in the next levels. Only on the seventh level does the pilgrim see the full light of day again.\*





V.D. Here is a diagrammatic view from the top revealing the stupa's complex, many layered, mandala-like form.\*



V.E. Finally, on the top level, the pilgrims find themselves in a forest of stupas and Buddha images. There are in all 72 Buddha images, for the most part hidden within the stupas.(Wikipedia)

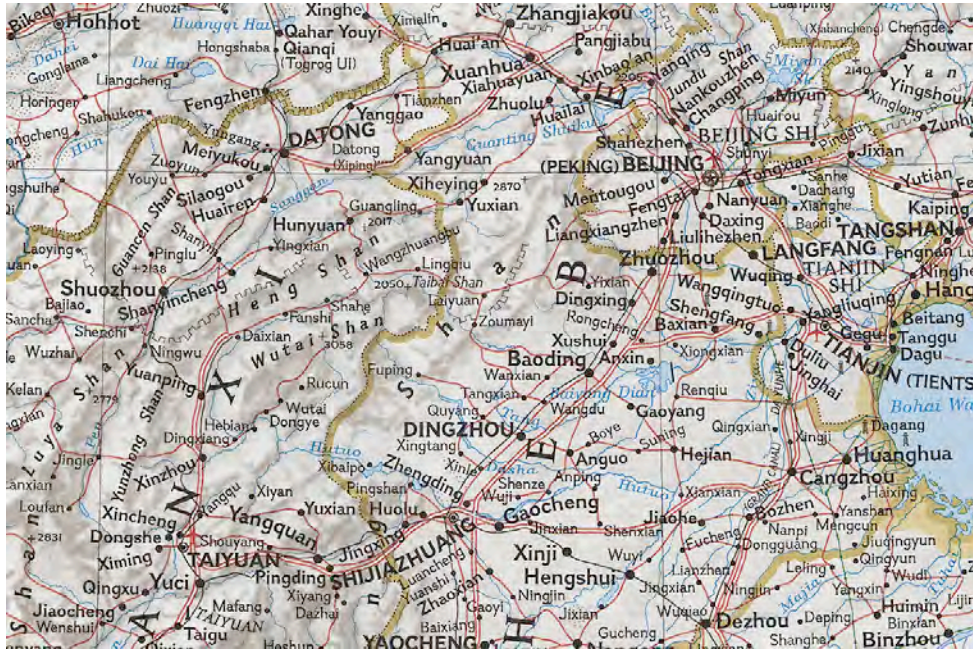




V. F Another view of the top of Borobudur.\* (Wikipedia)



## VI. China



### VI. A. North Central China

Note the city of Datong, almost directly west of Beijing. Directly below it one can see Wu Tai Shan, a famous ancient Buddhist site.

We begin with Datong, for just outside that city we find an ancient example of how Buddhism's central image radically changed in China. The *dagoba*, for reasons not fully understood, was transformed into a pagoda, a tower, usually with several roofs. The form is radically different, though on the highest roof, one can often see the remnants of the stupa form.



VI. B. The great pagoda at Datong. The pilgrimage now goes not only around but up in this early pagoda.



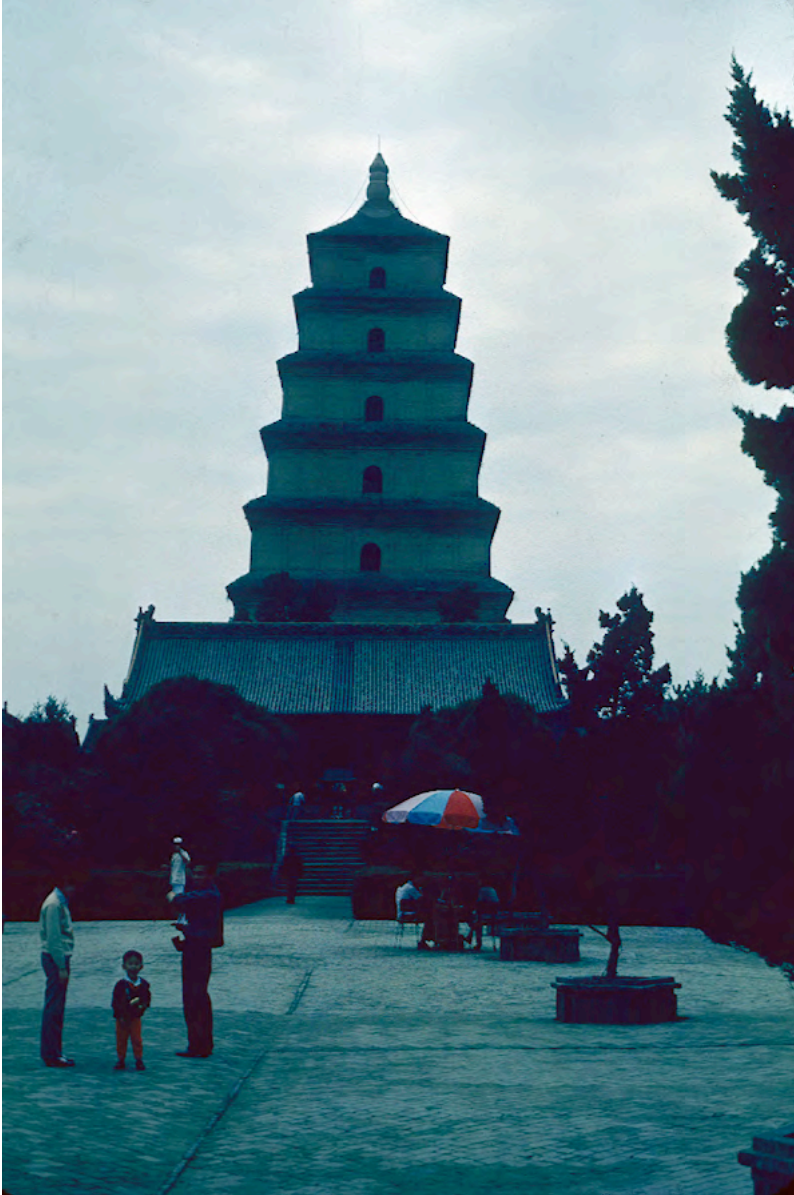


VI. C. As one climbs, one circumambulates statues of the Buddha and his disciples on every level.





VI. D. The Little Goose Pagoda in Xian was built from 707-709 C.E. to house manuscripts brought back from India.



VI. E. The Big Goose Pagoda in Xian, built in 652 C.E. This pagoda was actually used as a place where Buddhist manuscripts were translated into Chinese.





VI. F. Near Hangzhou around West Lake in east China there was a major Buddhist center, with many, now solid, pagoda towers.





VI. G. In Ling Yan Si, not far from Beijing, we find this wonderful example of the pagoda.



VI. H. Nearby Beijing, at Ling Yan Si, is also a veritable forest of votive stupas.





VI. I. At Shao Lin, in central China where Bodhidharma, the founder of Chan Buddhism, is supposed to have settled, we find another forest of pagodas.





VI. J. and K. In Wu Tai Shan, however, we find a more typical stupa of the Tibetan (*chorten*) type.



VI. L.



VI. M. More stupa forms from Wu Tai Shan.





VI. N. Even in Beijing, one can also see a huge example of the Tibetan form of the stupa, for just outside the Forbidden City is a large stupa built in earlier times by the Tibetans. It is called the white Dagoba and was built to commemorate a visit to Beijing by the Dalai Lama in 1651.



## VII Korea and Japan



VII. A. A map of Korea and Japan. Both Korea and Japan were profoundly influenced by Chinese Buddhism and have tended to use primarily the pagoda rather than the original stupa image.



VII. A. A stone pagoda in Pulguksa, Korea





VII. C. Another stone pagoda in Korea





VII. D. Kofuku-ji, one of the most famous pagodas in Nara, Japan\* (Wikipedia)



VIII. E. The great Toji pagoda in Kyoto\* (Wikipedia)

## Epilogue



The age of stupa building is, of course, not yet over. Indeed, the Great Stupa of Dharmakaya, containing the skull of Vidyadhara Chogyam Trungpa who died in 1987, has been constructed and consecrated in Colorado at the Shambala Mountain Center.



The Great Stupa, Shambala Mountain Center, Colorado\*

Since Buddhism is alive and well in America we can expect that stupa building will continue, eventually incorporating American ideas and style. Just as the stupa changed as it moved around Asia, we should anticipate that it will also take on an American cast as well. Perhaps it already has.

The stupa, among other things, contains and/or expresses what people who believe in it value most. Thus the earliest stupas contained the remains of the Buddha and some of his well-known followers. As I look around the American landscape, I do see stupa-like structures and they do contain, for good or for ill, what many of us think is most valuable.

There are, for instance, a few domed churches, using as a prototype St. Peter's in Rome, but there are also plenty of gold-domed banks, looking strangely stupa-like, to keep our money safe and to enliven the landscape with the promise of wealth.



And then, of course, there is the great dome structure that dominates all else.



(Wikipedia)

This is, after all, the symbol of what Americans hold most sacred: democracy, freedom, and the American way. In a very real sense, this dome has replaced for many the authority once portrayed by the Christian dome. Whether these American values themselves will ever be replaced by Buddhist *anatta*, no self, and compassion is an open question. What is clear is that the domed structure, surmounted by a vertical image, is a common and very potent symbol. Religions and particular values may come and go, but the dome, in one form or another, will never die.

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The Pagoda at Bai ma si, where Buddhism first began in China  
The Bai Ma (white horse) seems most appropriate.

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