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# The Symbolism of the Early Stūpa\*

by Peter Harvey

## I. Introduction

In this paper, I wish to focus on the symbolism of the Buddhist stūpa. In its simplest sense, this is a “(relic) mound” and a symbol of the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*. I wish to show, however, that its form also comprises a system of overlapping symbols which make the stūpa as a whole into a symbol of the Dhamma and of the enlightened state of a Buddha.

Some authors, such as John Irwin,<sup>1</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy,<sup>2</sup> and, to some extent, Lama Anagarika Govinda,<sup>3</sup> have seen a largely pre-Buddhist, Vedic meaning in the stūpa’s symbolism. I wish to bring out its *Buddhist* meaning, drawing on certain evidence cited by Irwin in support of *his* interpretation, and on the work of such scholars as Gustav Roth.<sup>4</sup>

## II. The Origins of the Stūpa

From pre-Buddhist times, in India and elsewhere, the remains of kings and heroes were interred in burial mounds (tumuli), out of both respect and fear of the dead. Those in ancient India were low, circular mounds of earth, kept in place by a ring of boulders; these boulders also served to mark off a mound as a sacred area.

According to the account in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (D.II.141–3), when the Buddha was asked what was to be done

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with his remains after death, he seems to have brought to mind this ancient tradition. He explained that his body should be treated like that of a *Cakkavatti* emperor: after wrapping it in many layers of cloth and placing it within two iron vessels, it should be cremated; the relics should then be placed in a stūpa “where four roads meet” (*cātummahāpathe*). The relics of a “disciple” (*sāvaka*) of a Tathagāta should be treated likewise. At the stūpa of either, a person’s *citta* could be gladdened and calmed at the thought of its significance.

After the Buddha’s cremation, his relics (*sarīras*) are said to have been divided into eight portions, and each was placed in a stūpa. The pot (*kumbha*) in which the relics were collected and the ashes of the cremation fire were dealt with in the same way (D.II.166).

One of the things which Aśoka (273–232 B.C.) did in his efforts to spread Buddhism, was to open up these original ten stūpas and distribute their relics in thousands of new stūpas throughout India. By doing this, the stūpa was greatly popularised. Though the development of the Buddha-image, probably in the second century A.D., provided another focus for devotion to the Buddha, stūpas remain popular to this day, especially in Theravādin countries. They have gone through a long development in form and symbolism, but I wish to concentrate on their early significance.

### III. Relics

Before dealing with the stūpa itself, it is necessary to say something about the relics contained in it. The contents of a stūpa may be the reputed physical relics (*sarīras* or *dhātus*) of Gotama Buddha, of a previous Buddha, of an Arahant or other saint, or copies of these relics; they may also be objects used by such holy beings, images symbolising them, or texts seen as the “relics” of the “Dhamma-body” of Gotama Buddha.

Physical relics are seen as the most powerful kind of contents. Firstly, they act as reminders of a Buddha or saint: of their spiritual qualities, their teachings, and the fact that they have actually lived on this earth. This, in turn, shows that it is possible for a human being to become a Buddha or saint. While

even copies of relics can act as reminders, they cannot fulfill the second function of relics proper. This is because these are thought to contain something of the spiritual force and purity of the person they once formed part of. As they were part of the body of a person whose mind was freed of spiritual faults and possessed of a great energy-for-good, it is believed that they were somehow affected by this. Relics are therefore seen as radiating a kind of beneficial power. This is probably why ch. 28 of the *Buddhavaṃsa* says:

The ancients say that the dispersal of the relics of Gotama, the great seer, was out of compassion for living beings.

Miraculous powers are also attributed to relics, as seen in a story of the second century B.C. related in the *Mahāvamsa* XXXI v.97–100. When king Duṭṭhāgāmaṇi was enshrining some relics of Gotama in the Great Stūpa at Anurādhapura, they rose into the air in their casket, and then emerged to form the shape of the Buddha. In a similar vein, the *Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā* p. 433 says that at the end of the 5000 year period of the *sāsana*, all the relics in Sri Lanka will assemble, travel through the air to the foot of the Bodhi tree in India, emit rays of light, and then disappear in a flash of light. This is referred to as the *parinibbāna* of the *dhātus*. Relics, then, act both as reminders of Gotama, or some other holy being, and as actual tangible links with them and their spiritual powers. The *Mahāvamsa* XXX v.100 says, indeed, that there is equal merit in devotion to the Buddha's relics as there was in devotion to him when he was alive.

#### IV. The Symbolism of the Stūpa's Components

The best preserved of the early Indian stūpas is the Great Stūpa at Sāñcī, central India. First built by Aśoka, it was later enlarged and embellished, up to the first century A.D. The diagrammatic representation of it in figure 1 gives a clear indication of the various parts of an early stūpa.

The four *torāṇas*, or gateways, of this stūpa were built between the first centuries B.C. and A.D., to replace previous

wooden ones. Their presence puts the stūpa, symbolically, at the place where four roads meet, as is specified in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. This is probably to indicate the openness and universality of the Buddhist teaching, which invites all to come and try its path, and also to radiate loving-kindness to beings in all four directions.

In a later development of the stūpa, in North India, the orientation to the four directions was often expressed by means of a square, terraced base, sometimes with staircases on each side in place of the early gateways. At Sāñcī, these gateways are covered with carved reliefs of the *Bodhisatta* career of Gotama and also, using aniconic symbols, of his final life as a Buddha. Symbols also represent previous Buddhas. In this way, the gates convey Buddhist teachings and the life of the Buddhas to those who enter the precincts of the stūpa.

Encircling Sāñcī stūpa, connecting its gateways, is a stone *vedikā*, or railing, originally made of wood. This encloses and marks off the site dedicated to the stūpa and a path for circumambulating it. Clockwise circumambulation, or *padakkhiṇā/ pradakṣiṇā*, literally “keeping to the right,” is the main act of devotion performed at a stūpa. It is also performed round a Bodhi tree and, especially in Tibet, round any sacred object, building or person. Keeping one’s right side towards someone is a way of showing respect to them: in the Pāli Canon, people are often said to have departed from the Buddha keeping their right side towards him. The precedent for actual circumambulation may have been the Brahmanical practice of the priest walking around the fire-sacrifice offerings, or of a bride walking around the domestic hearth at her marriage.<sup>5</sup> All such practices demonstrate that what is walked around is, or should be, the “centre” of a person’s life.

From the main circumambulatory path at Sāñcī, a devotee can mount some stairs to a second one, also enclosed by a *vedikā*. This second path runs round the top of the low cylindrical drum of the stūpa base. The *Divyāvadāna* refers to this as the *medhī*, or platform, while some modern Sinhalese sources refer to it as the *āsana*, or throne. This structure serves to elevate the main body of the stūpa, and so put it in a place of honour. In later stūpas, it was multiplied into a series of terraces, to raise the stūpa dome to a yet more honourific height. These terraces

were probably what developed into the multiple rooves of the East Asian form of the stūpa, often known in the West as a pagoda.

The most obvious component of the stūpa is the solid dome, resting on the base. Its function is to house the precious relics within (the Burmese say that the presence of relics gives a stūpa a "heart"). The relics are kept in a relic-chamber, usually somewhere on the central axis of the dome. In this, they are often found to rest in a golden container, placed within a silver, then bronze, then earthenware ones. The casing of the stūpa dome seems therefore to be seen as the outermost and least valuable container of the relics. Indeed, the usual term for the dome of a stūpa, both in the Sinhalese tradition and in two first century A.D. Sanskrit texts, translated from their Tibetan versions by Gustav Roth,<sup>6</sup> is *kumbha*, or pot. The Sanskrit *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* also reports the Buddha as saying that his relics should be placed in a golden *kumbha*,<sup>7</sup> while the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* says that the Buddha's relics were collected in a *kumbha* before being divided up. Again, *kumbha* is used as a word for an urn in which the bones of a dead person are collected, in the Brahmanical *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya-Sūtra*.<sup>8</sup> These facts reinforce the idea of the stūpa dome being seen as the outermost container of the relics.

The dome of the stūpa is a "*kumbha*" not only as a relic pot, but also because of symbolic connotations of the word *kumbha*. At S.II.83, it is said that the death of an Arahant, when feelings "grow cold" and *sarīras* remain, is like the cooling off of a *kumbha* taken from an oven, with *kapallāni* remaining. Woodward's translation gives "sherds" for this, but the Rhys Davids and Stede *Pali-English Dictionary* gives "a bowl in the form of a skull . . . an earthenware pan used to carry ashes." The implication of the cited passage would seem to be that a (cold) *kumbha* is itself like the relics of a saint; certainly Dh.p. v.40 sees the body (*kāya*) as like a *kumbha* (in its fragility, says the commentary). Thus, the stūpa dome both is a container of the relics, and also an analogical representative of the relics.

The use of the term *kumbha* for the stūpa dome may well have further symbolic meaning. It may relate to the *pūrṇa-ghaṭa* (or *pūrṇa-kumbha*), or vase of plenty. This is one of the eight auspicious symbols in the Sinhalese and Tibetan traditions, and



is found as a decoration in ancient Indian Buddhist art. *Pūrṇa-ghaṭa* designs, for example, were among those on the dome of the Great Stūpa at Amarāvati.<sup>9</sup> The *pūrṇa-ghaṭa* is also an auspicious symbol in Hinduism, where it is probably equivalent to the golden *kumbha*, containing *amṛta* (the gods' nectar of immortality), which emerged at the churning of the cosmic ocean.<sup>10</sup>

To decide on the symbolic meanings of *kumbha* in Buddhism, we may fruitfully look at further uses of the word *kumbha* in *sutta* similies. At S.V.48 and A.V.337, water pouring out from an upturned *kumbha* is likened to an *ariyan* disciple getting rid of unskilful states, while at Dh.p. v.121–2, a *kumbha* being gradually filled by drops of water is likened to a person gradually filling himself with evil or merit. In this way, the *kumbha* is generally likened to the personality as a container of bad or good states. A number of passages, though, use a *full kumbha* as a simile for a specifically *positive* state of being. At A.II.104, a person who understands, as they really are, the four *ariyan* truths, is like a full (*pūro*)*kumbha*. Miln.414, with Sn. v. 721–2, sees one who has perfected his recluseship (an Arahant, surely) as being like a full *kumbha*, which makes no sound when struck: his speech is not boastful, but he teaches Dhamma. At A.I.131, a person of wide wisdom (*puṭhupañño*), who bears in mind the Dhamma he has heard, is like an upright *kumbha* which accumulates the water poured into it. The implication of these passages is that the stūpa dome, if known as a *kumbha* and even decorated with *pūrṇa-ghaṭa* motifs, would be a natural symbol for the personality of someone who is “full” of Dhamma: a Buddha or saint. While the Hindu *pūrṇa-ghaṭa* contains *amṛta*, the Buddhist one contains Dhamma, that which brings a person to the *amata* and which in the highest sense (Nibbāna) is this “deathless” state.

The above symbolism neatly dove-tails with another indication of the dome's meaning. As stūpas developed, they sometimes came to have interior strengthening walls radiating from the centre, as in figure 2. As the stūpa dome, in plan, is circular, the impression is strongly given of the Dhamma-wheel symbol. This symbolises both the Buddha and the Dhamma—teaching, path and culmination—in a number of ways. For example, i) its regularly spaced spokes suggest the spiritual order and mental

integration produced in one who practices Dhamma; ii) as the spokes converge in the hub, so the factors of Dhamma, in the sense of the path, lead to Dhamma, in the sense of Nibbāna; iii) as the spokes stand firm in the hub, so the Buddha was the discoverer and teacher of the Dhamma: he firmly established its practice in the world. The Dhamma-wheel is also a symbol of universal spiritual sovereignty, which aligns with the significance of the stūpa's openness to the four directions (see above).

The stūpa dome, then, is not only a container of the Buddha's relics and their power, but also symbolises both the state of the Buddha, and the Dhamma he encompassed. The dome is also known, in the third century A.D. *Divyāvadāna*, as the *aṇḍa*, or egg. The meaning of this must be that, just as an egg contains the potential for growth, so the stūpa dome contains relics, sometimes known as *bījas*, or seeds. By devotion to the stūpa and its relics, a person's spiritual life may grow and be fruitful. This connotation is a neat parallel to that of the dome as a "vase of plenty."

Another connection with spiritual growth is provided by the association of the stūpa dome with the lotus (which, incidentally, is often portrayed growing out of a *pūrṇa-ghaṭa*). Domes are often decorated with lotus designs, and their circular plans resemble the circle of an open lotus flower, as in the lotus-medallion shown in figure 3. In addition, the Burmese see the shape of the stūpa (whose bulk is its dome) as that of a lotus bud, with the name of its components recalling the idea of a flower bud with its young leaves folded in adoration.<sup>11</sup> We see, then, that a further Buddhist symbol is included in the stūpa as a symbol-system.

The lotus, of course, is a common Buddhist symbol from early times. While it is a popular pan-Indian symbol for birth, its meaning in Buddhism is best given by a passage frequently recurring in the *suttas* (e.g., S.III.140):

"Just as, monks, a lotus, blue, red, or white, though born in the water, grown up in the water, when it reaches the surface stands unsoiled by the water; just so, monks, though born in the world, grown up in the world, having overcome the world, a Tathāgata abides unsoiled by the world."

Just as the beautiful lotus blossom grows up from the mud and

water, so one with an enlightened mind, a Buddha, develops out of the ranks of ordinary beings, by maturing, over many lives, the spiritual potential latent in all. He thus stands out above the greed, hatred and delusion of the world, not attached to anything, as a lotus flower stands above the water, unsoiled by it. The lotus, then, symbolises the potential for spiritual growth latent in all beings, and the complete non-attachment of the enlightened mind, which stands beyond all defilements.

Not only are the Dhamma-wheel and lotus symbols incorporated within the stūpa but, as we shall now see, the other key symbol, the Bodhi tree, also finds a place in this symbol-system. On top of Sāñcī stūpa can be seen a *yaṣṭi*, or pole, with three discs on it (figure 1). These discs represent ceremonial parasols, the ancient Indian emblems of royalty. Large ceremonial parasols are still used in South-East Asia, for example to hold over a man about to be ordained, i.e., over someone in a role parallel to that of *prince* Siddhattha. In Tibetan Buddhism, such parasols are held over the Dalai Lama on important occasions. By placing parasols on a stūpa, there is expressed the idea of the spiritual sovereignty of the Buddha and his teachings (also expressed by the Dhamma-wheel symbol). In accordance with this interpretation of a stūpa's pole and discs, we see that king Duṭṭhāgamaṇi of Sri Lanka (second century B.C.), when he had finished the Great Stūpa at Anurādhapura, placed his royal parasol on it, conferring on it sovereignty over Sri Lanka for seven days (*Mahāvamsa* XXXI v. 90 and 111); he later replaced his parasol with a wood or stone copy.

While there are three honourific parasol-discs at Sāñcī, on later stūpas these generally increased in number, so as to increase the inferred honour.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, they came to fuse into a spire, as seen in the present super-structure of the Great Stūpa at Anurādhapura (figure 4). Another phase in the development of a spire can be seen in the 14–16th century Shwe Dagōn Stūpa in Rangoon (figure 5). Here, the dome is bell-shaped and has come to merge with the spire, to form one flowing outline. Because the spire no longer really conveys the impression of a series of parasol-discs, a separate, large metal parasol is placed at its summit.

The use of the parasol as an emblem of royalty probably derives from the ancient custom of a ruler sitting under the shade of a sacred tree, at the centre of a community, to admin-

ister justice. The shading tree thus became an insignia of sovereignty. When the ruler moved about, it came to be represented by a parasol. The parasols on a stūpa, then, while being an emblem of sovereignty, *also* connote a sacred tree. Indeed, a second century B.C. relief from Amarāvātī depicts a stūpa which, in place of the *yaṣṭi* and parasol discs, has a tree with parasol-shaped leaves (figure 6).

Of course, the Buddhist sacred tree is the Bodhi tree,<sup>13</sup> so the *yaṣṭi* and parasols on a stūpa must symbolically represent this, itself a potent Buddhist symbol. This idea is re-inforced by the fact that, in Burma, free-standing parasols are sometimes worshipped as Bodhi tree symbols, and the metal parasols on stūpas sometimes have small brass Bodhi leaves hanging from them. That the *yaṣṭi* and parasol-discs represent a Bodhi tree is also supported when we examine the structure immediately below them on a stūpa. Figure 1 shows that, at Sāñcī, this is a cubical stone, surrounded by another *vedikā*, or railing. Now these two features are reminiscent of ones found at pre-Buddhist tree-shrines, which had an altar-seat at their base, and a railing to surround their sacred enclosure. In Buddhism, descendants of the original Bodhi tree became objects of devotion for, as in the case of physical relics, they were a tangible link with the departed Buddha and his spiritual power. Such Bodhi trees were enclosed by railings in the same way as the previous tree shrines. As the style of the stūpa developed, the cubical stone structure expanded in size and came to incorporate the *vedikā* in the form of a carved relief on its surface, as in figure 4. The important point to note is that Bodhi tree shrines developed into more complex forms, as seen for example in figure 7; as this happened, the superstructure of stūpas mirrored this development, as seen in figure 8. This is clear evidence that the superstructure of a stūpa was symbolically equated with a Bodhi tree and its shrine.

The Bodhi tree, of course, as the kind of tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, became established as a symbol for that enlightenment, in early Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> Like the lotus, it is a symbol drawn from the vegetable kingdom. While both, therefore, suggest spiritual *growth*, the lotus emphasizes the potential for growth, whereas the Bodhi tree indicates the culmination of this growth, enlightenment.

The structure underneath the royal/Bodhi tree symbol

came to be known, e.g., in the *Divyāvadāna*, as the *harmikā*, or “top enclosure.” This was the name for a cool summer chamber on the roof of a building. This connection need not contradict the idea of the structure as a symbolic Bodhi tree shrine, for both a cool “top enclosure” and a Bodhi tree can symbolise the enlightened mind: the chamber suggests its “coolness,” and the tree suggests its enlightened nature.

While all the components of the stūpa seem now to have been discussed, there remains one of crucial importance: the axial pillar running down the centre of the dome. This is hidden in most stūpas, but it can be seen in the stūpa shown in figure 9. John Irwin has reported the finding of axis holes in early stūpas, some containing fragments of a wooden axis pole.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the Lauriya-Nandagarh Stūpa (excavated 1904–5), he reports the finding of a waterlogged wooden axis-stump, penetrating deep below the original ground-level. Irwin regards this stūpa as a very ancient one, pre-third century B.C., but S.P. Gupta argues against this.<sup>16</sup> In the most ancient stūpas known (fourth-fifth centuries B.C.), Vaiśālī and Piprahwa, we find, respectively, only a pile of earth and a pile of mud faced with mud bricks. They had no axial pole or shaft. Irwin’s evidence, however, is well marshalled, and shows that a wooden axis pole had become incorporated in Buddhist stūpas by the third-second centuries B.C.; S. Paranavitana also has found evidence of what can only have been stone axial pillars in the ruins of early Sinhalese stūpas.<sup>17</sup> Axial pillars were also a very important feature of East Asian “pagodas,” as shown in figure 10. The pagoda form probably developed from a late form of the Indian stūpa and certain multi-rooved Chinese buildings. It is important to note, though, that none of the pre-Buddhist Chinese precursors had an axial pillar: this must have derived from the Indian stūpa, therefore.<sup>18</sup>

The archaeological evidence, then, indicates that in early Indian stūpas, after the most ancient period, wooden axial pillars were incorporated, and that in later ones, they were superseded by stone pillars. Originally, they projected above the stūpa dome, with the *yaṣṭi* and parasols as separate items, as in the case of the Amarāvati Stūpa (dating from Aśokan times) shown in figure 9. When, however, the domes of stūpas came to be enlarged, the axes became completely buried within, and the *yaṣṭis* were fixed on top of them, as if being their extensions.

The *Divyāvadāna* refers to a “*yūpa-yaṣṭi*” being implanted in the summit of an enlarged stūpa.<sup>19</sup> This, and other references, shows that the usual term for the axial pillar of a stūpa was *yūpa*. Somewhat surprisingly, this was the term for the wooden post where, in Vedic religion, an animal would be tethered before it was sacrificed to the gods. There is a parallel in more than name, however. The Vedic *yūpa* was square at the bottom, octangular in the middle, and round at the top, while the stone axial pillars of ancient Sinhalese stūpas are found to be of the same basic shape.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, then, the axial pillars of stūpas had close associations with the Vedic sacrificial post. How can this be explained? While the non-violent teachings of Buddhism rejected animal sacrifice, early Buddhist stūpas may well have been built round Vedic sacrificial posts by converted Brahmins. Indeed, excavation of the early Gotihawa Stūpa, by which Aśoka placed a pillar, has revealed animal bones below the original ground level at the base of the stūpa axis, where a wooden post once stood. The most ancient stūpas lack signs of any axial pillar, probably because Buddhism was not sufficiently well established in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. for the conversion of a Brahmanic site to have been acceptable. With the increasing popularity of Buddhism, it would have come to be acceptable for stūpas to be built around existing Vedic *yūpas*. These already marked sacred spots of sorts: building stūpas on these spots showed that they were now taken over by the new religion. In such early stūpas, the original wooden Vedic *yūpa* was probably retained to form the stūpa axis, but later on, a stone *yūpa* would have been erected to mark the sacred spot which would be the centre of a new stūpa.

The axial *yūpa* of a stūpa surely had a further symbolic function. To fully explore this, it is also necessary to note an alternative name for the stūpa axis. Paranarvitana has reported that the monks of Sri Lanka (in the 1940s) gave the traditional term for the stūpa axis as *Inda-khīla*, equivalent to the Sanskrit *Indra-kīla*, Indra’s stake.<sup>21</sup> The monks did not know the reason for this name, however. John Irwin has argued that both the terms *yūpa* and *Indra-kīla* show the stūpa axis to symbolise the *axis mundi*: the world pillar or world tree of Vedic mythology.<sup>22</sup> I shall summarise Irwin’s arguments below before going on to my own preferred interpretation. Firstly, he argues that the Vedic sacrificial *yūpa* was itself a substitute for the axial world



tree, as demonstrated by the way it is addressed in Brahmanic texts, and the fact that the tree sections of the *yūpa* (square, octagonal and round) are regarded as representing, respectively, the earth, the atmosphere, and the heavens.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, Irwin notes that “Indra’s stake” is the designation, in the Vedas, for the stake with which Indra pegged the primaeval mound to the bottom of the cosmic ocean on which it floated, thus giving our world stability.<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, Irwin argues that this stake is mythologically synonymous with the Vedic world axis.<sup>25</sup> He refers to a Vedic cosmogonic myth in which Indra, with his *vajra*, slays the obstructing dragon Vṛtra, so as to release the waters of fertility and life locked up in the primaeval mound, floating on the cosmic ocean. At the same time, Indra props up the atmosphere and heavens with the world axis or tree (which seems equivalent to his *vajra*), and pegs the mound to the ocean bottom, as above. The world axis and Indra’s stake can therefore be seen as running into each other, merging into one.<sup>26</sup> Fourthly, Irwin cites certain archaeological evidence which *might* suggest that Buddhist stūpa builders actually conceived of the stūpa axis as symbolising the world axis or world tree of the above Vedic myth.<sup>27</sup> Some of this evidence is as follows:

- i) a reliquary from the Great Stūpa at Anurādhapura has a *yūpa* obtruding from its top, sprouting leaves as if it were a tree (as shown in figure 11).
- ii) the description of the relic chamber of the above stūpa at *Mahāvamsa* XXX 63 ff. refers to a huge golden Bodhi tree standing at the centre of the stūpa, as if the tree were the stūpa axis.<sup>28</sup>
- iii) the circumambulatory paths of some early stūpas were paved with azure-blue glass tiles, or glazed tiles decorated with water-symbols, suggesting, perhaps, that the stūpa dome symbolically rests on the cosmic ocean, as did the primaeval mound of Vedic myth.<sup>29</sup>

Irwin, therefore, sees the stūpa as an *image of the creation of the universe* (the archetype of regeneration), with the stūpa axis founded on the waters and rising through the earth, atmosphere and heavens so as to unite them and form a communicating link between them.<sup>30</sup>

I do not want to rule out Irwin's interpretation (though it seems unlikely), but I feel that there are more "Buddhist" ones easier to hand: after all, the Bodhi tree and *water*-born lotus are well established *Buddhist* symbols. Moreover, Irwin himself thinks that while the above Vedic myth affected stūpa construction and the meaning of the axis, the Vedic significance came to be mostly forgotten as the old meaning was adapted for the new and increasingly dominant doctrinal scheme.

Inasmuch as the stūpa axis seems to have originated as a Vedic sacrificial post, it can surely have taken on a symbolic meaning from this association. To see what this was, we have, firstly, to examine what the Buddhist equivalent of "sacrifice" was. In the *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (D.I.144 ff.) it is said that the Buddha was once asked by a Brahmin about the best form of "sacrifice." Instead of describing some bloody Brahmanical sacrifice, he answers by talking about giving alms-food and support to monks, Brahmins and the poor, about living a virtuous life, being self-controlled, practicing *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditations, and attaining Nibbāna. He describes each such stage of the Buddhist path as a kind of "sacrifice," with the attainment of its goal being the highest and best kind. Again, at D.III.76 it is said that a *yūpa* is the place where a future *Cakkavatti* emperor will distribute goods to all, renounce his royal life to become a monk under Metteyya Buddha, and go on to become an Arahant. Therefore, what was once a sacrificial post could naturally come, in the new religion of Buddhism, to symbolise the Buddhist path and goal—the Dhamma—and all the "sacrifices" involved in these. Indeed, at Miln. 21–22, it is said of the monk Nāgasena that he is engaged in

pointing out the way of Dhamma, carrying the torch of Dhamma, *bearing aloft the yūpa of Dhamma*, offering the gift of Dhamma . . . sounding the drum of Dhamma, roaring the lion's roar, thundering out Indra's thunder and thoroughly satisfying the whole world by thundering out sweet utterances and wrapping them round with the lightning flashes of superb knowledge, filling them with the waters of compassion and the great cloud of the Deathlessness of Dhamma . . .

This passage certainly shows that Buddhism could draw on



Vedic symbolism, but also shows that such symbolism is fully Buddhized when it is used. “*Yūpa*” is used as a metaphor for Dhamma: the Buddhist teaching, path and goal, and Indra’s releasing of the cosmic waters is a metaphor for a great Dhamma-teacher’s compassionate bestowal of that which brings Deathlessness.

When we look at the other term for the *stūpa* axis, “Indra’s stake,” we also see that this came to have a clear Buddhist meaning. Firstly, we see that from the Vedic myth about Indra’s stabilising stake, *Indra-kīla* came to be a term for the huge pillars standing firmly in the ground at the entrance to ancient Indian and Sinhalese cities, being used to secure the heavy gates when they stood open. It also became a term for the gateposts of houses. Indeed, *Indra-kīla* became a term for anything which was stable and firmly rooted and which secured the safety of something. While it might be thought that the *stūpa* axis was called an *Indra-kīla* because it structurally stabilised the *stūpa*, this does not seem to have been the case, architecturally.<sup>31</sup> It is more likely that the axis was an “Indra’s stake” in a purely symbolic sense, symbolising the Dhamma, the stable centre of a Buddhist’s life, which secures his safety in life’s troubles and also acts as a “gateway” to a better life and, ultimately, to Deathlessness. The use of “Indra’s stake” in metaphors in the *suttas* indicates that, in particular, the term symbolises that aspect of the Dhamma which is the unshakeable state of mind of Arahants and other *ariyan* persons. At S.V.444, one who understands the four *ariyan* truths and has sure and well-founded knowledge is like an unshakeable *Inda-khīla*, while at Sn.v.229, we read:

“As an *Inda-khīla* resting in the earth would be unshakeable by the four winds, of such a kind I say is the good man, who having understood the *ariyan* truths, sees them (clearly). This splendid jewel is the Saṅgha; by this truth may there be well-being.”

Dhp.v.95 uses the metaphor specifically of an Arahant:

Like the earth, he does not resent; a balanced and well disciplined person is like an *Inda-khīla*.

This is probably also the case at Thag.v.663:

But those who in the midst of pain and happiness have overcome the seamstress (craving), stand like an *Inda-khīla*; they are neither elated nor cast down.

Referring to the stūpa axis as “Indra’s stake,” then, would seem to imply that the axis was seen as symbolising the unshakeable state of an *ariyan* person’s Dhamma-filled mind.<sup>32</sup> Such symbolism harmonises with that of the axis as a *yūpa*, and also with that of the dome as a *kumbha*, representing the personality of someone full of Dhamma.

A final aspect of the symbolism of the stūpa axis is that it was seen to represent Mount Meru, the huge axial world mountain of Hindu and Buddhist mythology, with the circular plan of the stūpa dome representing the circle of the earth. That the stūpa was seen in this way, even in Theravāda lands, can be seen from several pieces of evidence. Firstly, the huge Bodhi tree which *Mahāvamsa* XXX v.63 ff. describes as being in the relic chamber of the Great Stūpa at Anurādhapura, is said to have a canopy over it on which are depicted the sun, moon and stars—which are said to revolve round Meru. Around the trees are said to be placed statues of the gods, the Four Great Kings who are said to guard the slopes of Meru; while the relic chamber walls are said to have painted on them zig-zag shaped walls—such walls, at least in the Tibetan tradition, are used to portray the rings of mountains on the disc of the earth. Secondly, the *harmikā* of ancient Sinhalese stūpas sometimes has the sun on the east face and the moon on the west face. Thirdly, in late Sinhalese texts, the term for the drum at the base of the stūpa spire (see figure 4) is *devatā koṭuva*, enclosure of the deities. This corresponds to the idea that the lower gods dwell on Meru, with Indra’s palace at its summit.<sup>33</sup>

I would see the significance of the Meru symbolism as being that the stūpa axis and dome represent the world of gods and men; the implication of this will be brought out below.

#### V. *The Symbolism of the Stūpa as a Whole*

So far, I have assigned various symbolic meanings to the components of the stūpa. The dome, container of the precious relics, can be seen to represent a pot full of Dhamma, a

Dhamma-wheel, a lotus flower, or the circle of the earth. The stūpa axis, as a *yūpa*, symbolises the Dhamma (teaching, path and realizations) and all its “sacrifices,” and, as *Inda-khīla*, symbolises the great stability of the Dhamma and the unshakeable nature of the mind full of Dhamma; it also represents Mount Meru, home of the gods. On top of the stūpa dome is a cool “top enclosure” and a *yaṣṭi* complete with honourific parasol-discs, equivalent to a Bodhi tree, symbol of a Buddha’s enlightenment and his enlightened mind.

While a stūpa is worthy of devotion due to the relics it contains, it also serves to inspire because the symbols of its separate components unite together to make an overall spiritual statement. The whole symbolises the enlightened mind of a Buddha (represented by the *yaṣṭi* and parasol-discs as Bodhi tree symbols) standing out above the world of gods and humans (represented by the axis and dome). The symbolism shows that the enlightened mind arises from within the world by a process of spiritual growth (represented by the dome as a lotus symbol, or as a vase of plenty) on a firm basis of the practice of Dhamma (represented by the dome as a Dhamma-wheel). This Dhamma (now represented by the axis) is also the path which leads up out of the world of humans and gods to enlightenment (represented by the *yaṣṭi* and parasol-discs, resting on top of the axis as its uppermost portion). A personality (the dome as a *kumbha*) full of such Dhamma is worthy of reverence and has an unshakeable mind (represented by the axis as *Inda-khīla*, with the *yaṣṭi* as its extension). In brief, we could say that the stūpa symbolises the Dhamma and the transformations it brings in one who practices it, culminating in enlightenment. It is not surprising, then, that at an early date, the various layers of the stūpa’s structure were explicitly seen as symbolising specific aspects of the Dhamma (teaching, path and culmination) and of a Buddha’s nature. Gustav Roth has translated, from their Tibetan versions, two ancient Sanskrit texts which see the stūpa as symbolising the Dharmakāya in the sense of the 37 “requisites of enlightenment” (*bodhipakṣiya-dharmas*) and certain other spiritual qualities.<sup>34</sup> These texts are the first century A.D. *Caitya-vibhāga-vinayabhāva Sūtra*, fragments of an unknown Vinaya, and the second century A.D. *Stūpa-lakṣana-kārikā-vivēcana* of the Lokottaravādin Vinaya. A scheme of symbolic corre-

spondences identical with that outlined in the first of these texts is shown in figure 12. Each layer of the stūpa's structure represents a group of spiritual qualities cultivated on the path, while the spire represents the powers of a Tathāgata.<sup>35</sup>

Another interesting passage quoted by Roth, from the first century A.D. Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya Kṣudraka-vastu*, also links the stūpa with the *bodhipakṣiyadharmas*. The passage deals with the death of Śāriputra, at which Ānanda—who has Śāriputra's relics—evinces dismay to the Buddha. The Buddha consoles him by asking him if Śāriputra has taken with him the aggregates of *śīla*, *samādhi*, *prajñā*, *vimukti*, or *vimuktijñānadarśana*. He then asks if Śāriputra has:

“taken away that which is the substance of my enlightened perception: the four applications of mindfulness . . . (the *bodhipakṣiyadharmas* are listed)?”

That is, though only the relics of Śāriputra remain, in the physical sense, the dharmas cultivated by him still remain; i.e., the Dharmakāya remains. With such passages in mind, it would have been very natural for Buddhists to look on the stūpa not only as a container of physical relics of a Buddha or saint, but also as symbolising the essential Dharma-qualities which such a person embodied, and which still exist, inviting others to embody.

In the Pāli passage on the death of Śāriputta (S.IV.161–3), the *bodhi-pakkhiyadhammas* are not specifically mentioned, though Ānanda says that he will bear in mind the strength-giving Dhamma of Śāriputta, and the Buddha recommends him, even after the Buddha's own *parinibbāna*, to abide with himself and Dhamma as refuge. This is to be done by way of the four *satipatṭhānas*, the first set of dhammas in the list of the 37 *bodhipakkhiyadhammas*. In two Pāli passages on the death of the Buddha, however, there is reference to the *bodhipakkhiyadhammas* (though not by this name). At D.II.120, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha lists the 37 dhammas as those known and taught by him, which his disciples should master, meditate on and spread abroad so that the holy life will last long and there shall be good and happiness for many. He then refers to his *parinibbāna* as being in three months time, and exhorts his monks, as he does on his death-bed:

“All conditioned phenomena are subject to decay; perfect yourselves with diligence.”

At M.II.243-5, Ānanda asks the Buddha to ensure that when he dies, there will be no unseemly disputes among his disciples, or harm to the manyfolk, as he has heard that there have been at the death of Mahāvīra, the Jain leader. In reply, the Buddha rhetorically asks Ānanda whether any of his monks differ over what he has taught out of his *abhiññā*, i.e., the 37 *bodhipakkiya-dhammas*. He goes on to imply that these comprise the essential *magga* and *paṭipada*; if disputes arise after his death, they will only be on matters of Vinaya, and be of trifling importance.

These passages all emphasize the idea that, even though a Buddha or Arahant dies, there still remains the essence of the path he taught and realized, in the form of the 37 *bodhipakkiya-dhammas*, and that bearing these in mind, and practicing them, will be of great benefit to people. After the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, while physical relics were important, the Dhamma is more so, as the Buddha emphasized to Vakkali when he said, “He who sees the Dhamma sees me, he who sees me sees the Dhamma.” It is not surprising, then, that the *stūpa*, the primary focus of early Buddhist devotion, should not only contain the relics of the Buddha or a saint, but should also symbolise the Dhamma, or the Buddha in the form of his *Dhammakāya*. Such a symbolic equation of the *stūpa* with the Buddha is, in fact, reflected in the early Vinayas, in which, where a *stūpa* is seen as having its own property (land and offerings), it is sometimes seen as “the property of the *stūpa*,” and sometimes as the “property of the Buddha.”

As a final point, I would like to try to tie together the functions of the *stūpa* as a reliquary with that of it as a Buddha-symbol, so as to show how the *stūpa* may be seen to depict both the Buddha's physical and spiritual personality. The classical *stūpa* contains relics of the Buddha, i.e., some of the *mahābhūtas* which composed his body, and should be placed “where four roads meet” (*cātummahāpathe*) (D.II.142). Even ignoring the fact that the *stūpa* dome came to be known as a *kumbha*, a common metaphor for the personality, these facts suggest that the *stūpa* may originally have been intended as a model of the enlightened personality. This can be seen from a passage at S.IV.194–

5. Here, a simile is given in which a town stands for the *kāya* (the body, or perhaps the personality other than *viññāṇa*), the “lord” of the town stands for *viññāṇa*, the “lord” of the town sits “in the midst in a square (where four roads meet)” (*majjhe sīṅghātako*), which represents the four *mahābhūtas* (extension, cohesion, heat and motion), and the “lord” receives a “message of truth,” representing Nibbāna. As the classical stūpa contains the four *mahābhūtas* of the Buddha and stands at the meeting of four roads, its dome can be seen to represent his *kāya* (Dhp.v.40 sees the *kāya* as like a *kumbha*), the relics represent the essentials of his body, and the central *yaṣṭi* and parasol-discs (and later the axis, too), represents his *viññāṇa*, which has received the “message” of Nibbāna, and been transformed by it.

In this paper, I hope to have shown that, even prior to its complex symbolism in the Vajrayāna tradition, the stūpa had developed, from simple beginnings, into system of inter-locking and mutually supporting symbols representing the Dhamma (teaching, path and realizations) and the enlightened personality embodying the culmination of Dhamma-practice.

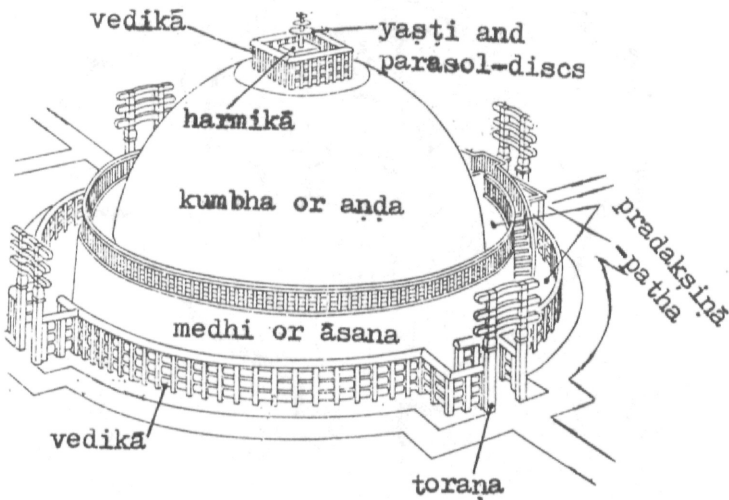


Figure 1

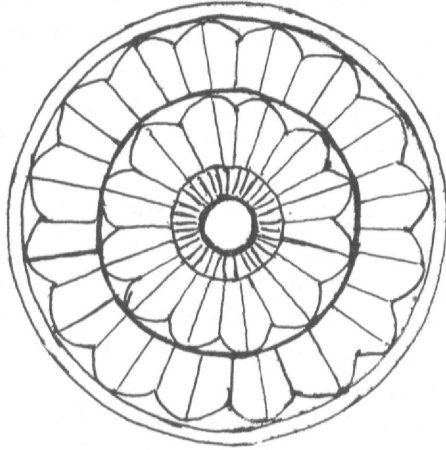


Figure 2

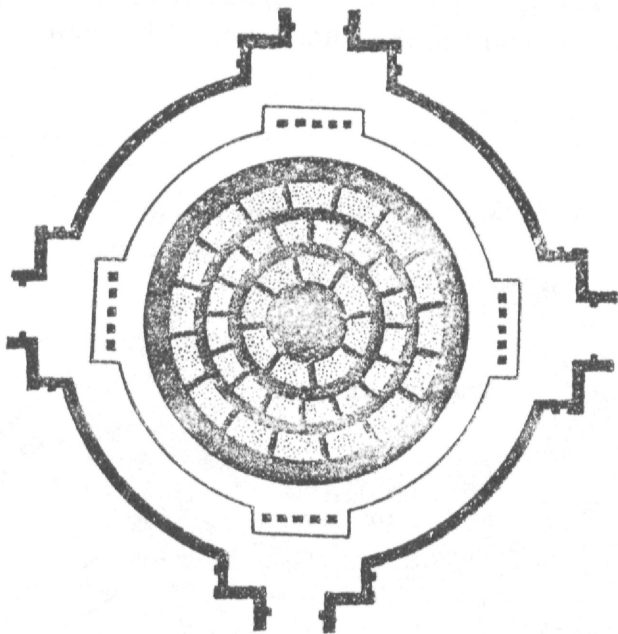


Figure 3

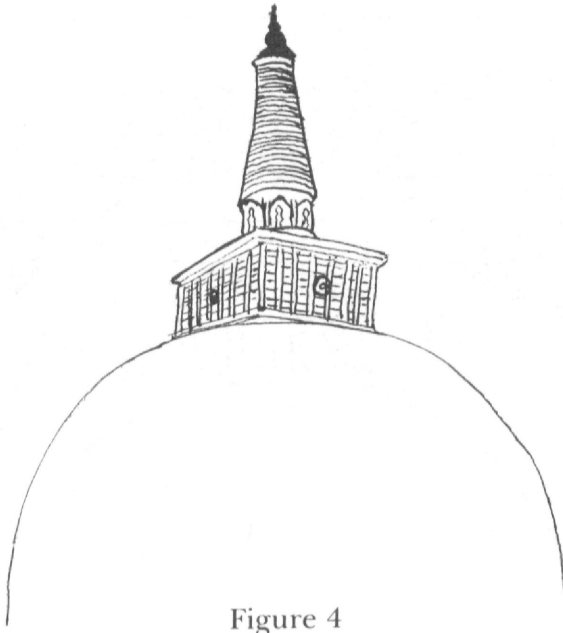


Figure 4

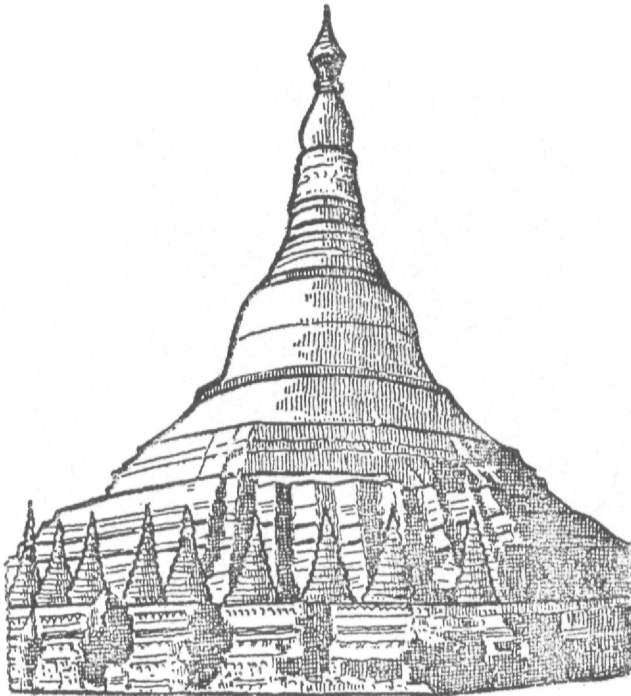


Figure 5



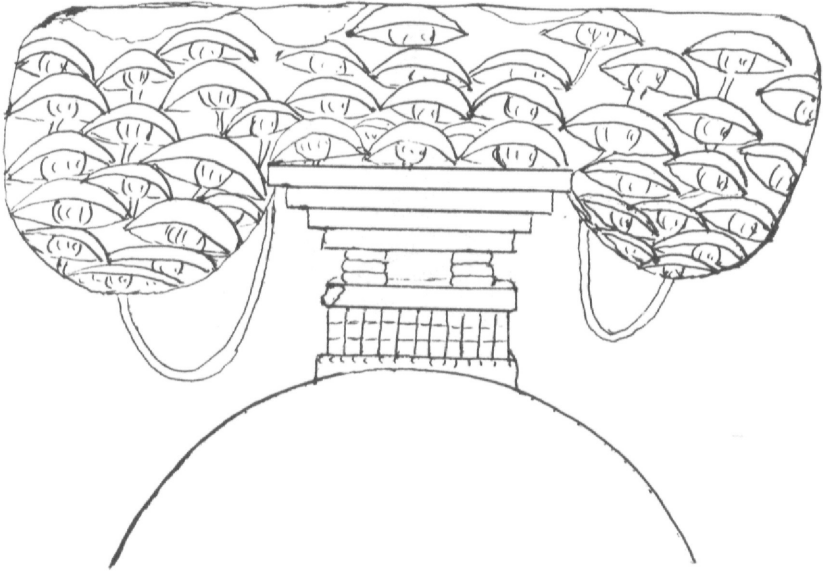


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

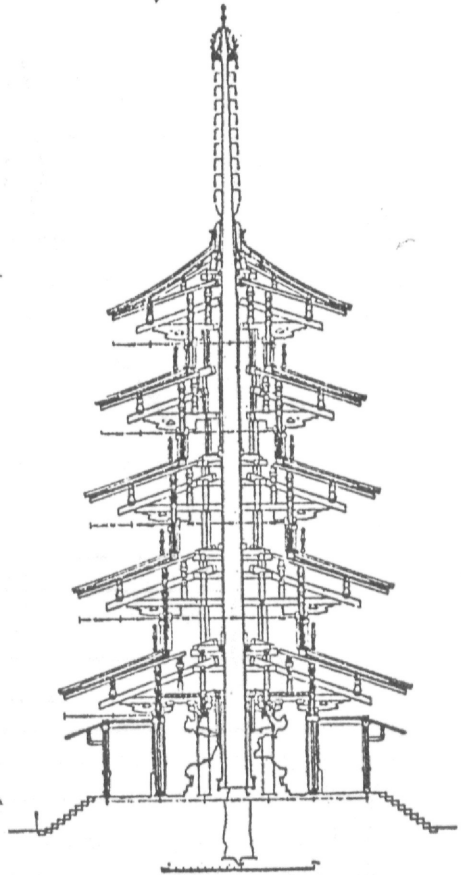


Figure 10

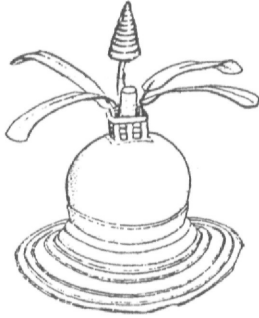


Figure 11

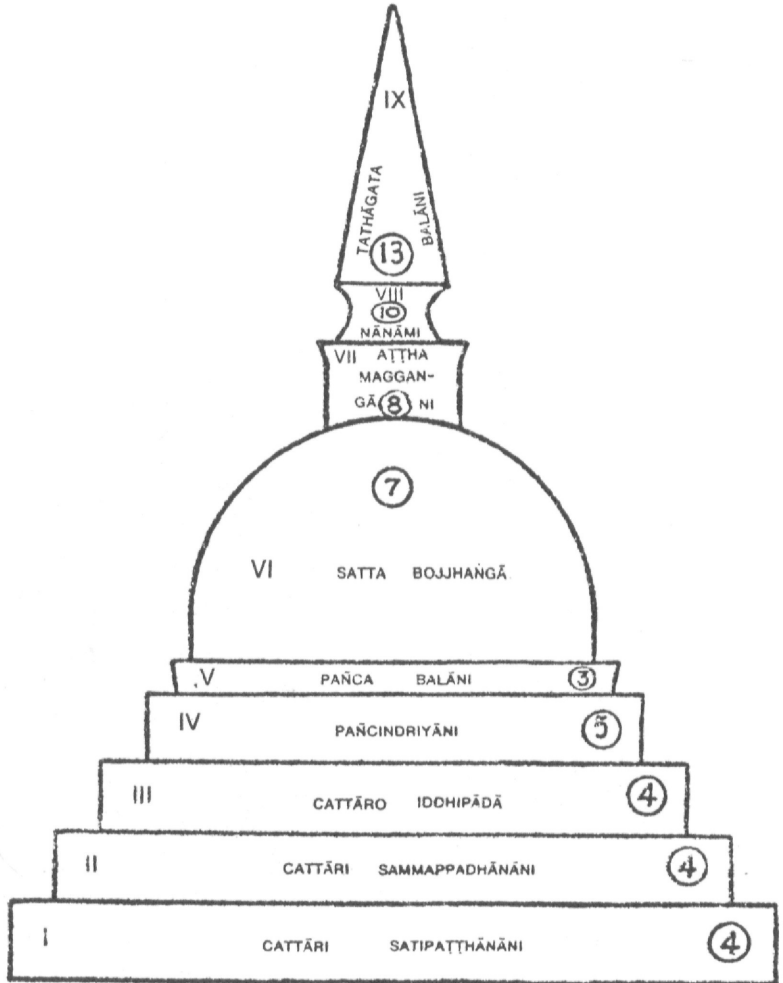


Figure 12

## ABBREVIATIONS

- A. *Anguttara Nikāya*  
 D. *Dīgha Nikāya*  
 Dh. *Dhammapadam*  
 M. *Majjhima Nikāya*  
 Miln. *Milindapañha*  
 S. *Samyutta Nikāya*  
 Sn. *Sutta-Nipāta*  
 Thag. *Theragāthā*

References to Pāli texts are all to the Pali Text Societies editions.

## NOTES

\* First given at the Eighth Symposium on Indian Religions (British Association for the History of Religion), Oxford, April 1982.

1. "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis—The Archaeological Evidence," *South Asian Archaeology 1977* (papers from the Fourth International Conference of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe; Naples, Instituto Universitario Orientale Seminario di Studi Asiatici, 1979) pp. 799–845; and "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa—An Exegesis," in A.L. Dallapiccola (ed.) *The Stūpa—Its Religious, Historical and Archaeological Significance* (Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980) pp. 12–38.

2. *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Cambridge, Mass., 1935, re-published by Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.

3. *The Psycho-Cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stūpa*, Emeryville, California, Dharma Press, 1976.

4. "The Symbolism of the Buddhist Stūpa," in A.L. Dallapiccola (ed.), *op. cit.*

5. *Hasting's Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1910) Vol. III, p. 657.

6. *Op. cit.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass.

9. D. Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta, Sahitya Samsad, 1971) p. 204.

10. B. Walker, *Hindu World* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1968) Vol. II, p. 132.

11. S. Yoe, *The Burman, his Life and Notions* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1910) pp. 158–9.

12. G. Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 184, points out that in the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya Kṣudraka-vastu*, it is said that a Tathāgata's stūpa should have 13 parasoldiscs, that of Arahants should have 4, that of Non-returners 3, that of Once-returners 2, and that of Stream-enterers 1.

13. While the *Aśvattha* tree—now known as the Bodhi tree—was the species of tree under which Gotama is said to have become enlightened, the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* states that the six previous Buddhas were each enlightened under different species of tree (D.II.2–8).

14. Early carved stone reliefs sometimes briefly depict the Buddha's life by showing symbols for the key events in his life: Bodhi tree (enlightenment), Dhamma-wheel (first sermon), and stūpa (*parinibbāna*). Examples of such reliefs, from the second and third centuries A.D. are illustrated in D.L. Snellgrove (ed.), *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris, UNESCO, 1978), p. 38.

15. "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis."

16. S.P. Gupta, *The Roots of Indian Art* (Delhi, BR Publishing Corporation, 1980) pp. 246–269.

17. *The Stūpa in Ceylon—Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Volume 5* (Colombo, 1946).

18. L. Ledderose, "Chinese Prototypes of the Pagoda," in A.L. Dallapiccola (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 239

19. Ed. C.B. Cowell and R. Neil, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1886, p. 244.

20. J. Irwin, "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa," p. 21.

21. *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

22. See note 1.

23. "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa," pp. 14 and 28.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

25. "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis," p. 826.

26. They can also be seen as equivalent to Indra's *vajra*. This is shown in the *Āpṣṭamba Śrautasūtra* VII,10,3 (as cited by A. Gail, "Cosmic Symbolism of the Spire of the Ceylon Dagoba," in A.L. Dallapiccola, *op. cit.*, p.260), where it is stated that, when the Vedic *yūpa* is raised, it is said:

"Rend open the earth, split the heaven-cloud, give us rain water. . . ."

27. "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis," p. 836.

28. "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa," p. 18.

29. "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis," pp. 831–2.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 826.

31. J. Irwin, "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa," p. 21.

32. Given that "Indra's stake" is closely associated with, and probably mythologically synonymous with, Indra's thunderbolt-sceptre, or *vajra* (see note 26), it is also significant that, at A.I.124, an Arahant is described as having a *citta* like a *vajira*, a term which may mean diamond, or be equivalent to Sanskrit *vajra*.

33. M. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1971), p. 203 reports that in contemporary Burma, the stūpa is often seen as representing Meru, with the three worlds (*kāma*, *rūpa* and *arūpa*) represented by the plynth and two parts of the dome, with the spire representing the Buddha.

34. See note 4.

35. The diagram does not depict the rains canopy (*varṣa-sthātī*), said to symbolise the Buddha's "great compassion." The details of the symbolism in the second text differ slightly, and it also sees the ground as symbolising *śīla*, and the first platform as symbolising *dāna*.

## FIGURES

1. The Great Stūpa at Sāñcī, adapted from A. Volwahren, *Living Architecture—India* (London, Macdonald, 1969) p. 91.
2. Lotus medallion design, from a railing on Bhārhut Stūpa, second century B.C., in the Indian Museum, Calcutta.
3. Plan of the third century A.D. Nāgārjunakoṇḍa Stūpa, from G. Combaz, "L'Évolution du Stūpa en Asie. Etude D'Architecture Bouddhique," in *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* (Bruxelles, L'Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1933), Vol. 12 (1932–3), pp. 163–306, figure 71.
4. The Great Stūpa at Anurādhapura, second century B.C., 54 metres high.
5. Shwe Dagōn Stūpa, Rangoon, 112 metres high, reputedly containing two hairs of Gotama Buddha, and belongings of three previous Buddhas; from G. Combaz, "L'Évolution du Stūpa en Asie. Les Symbolismes du Stūpa," in *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* (Bruxelles, L'Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1936), Vol. 14 (1935–6), pp. 1–126, figure 29.
6. Relief of a stūpa superstructure on a drum slab, Amarāvati, second century B.C., British Museum. Drawn from a photograph (figure 24) in J. Irwin, "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis" (reference as in note 1).
7. Relief medallion depicting a tree-temple (*Bodhi-ghara*). Mathurā, second century B.C. Now in Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Taken from J. Irwin, "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis," figure 27.
8. Stūpa depicted on gateway of stūpa no. 3, Sāñcī. Drawn by Margaret Hall, as in J. Irwin, "The Stūpa as Cosmic Axis," figure 28.
9. Superstructure of the Great Stūpa at Amarāvati, as depicted on a relief slab originally encasing the stūpa. Second century A.D., Government Museum, Madras.
10. Cross-section of Hōryūji Pagoda, Nara, seventh century A.D. Figure 1 (p. 257) in D. Seckel, "Stūpa Elements Surviving in East Asian Pagodas," in A.L. Dallapiccola (ed.) *The Stūpa* (reference as in note 1).
11. Gold reliquary in the form of a stūpa. From the Ruvanvāli stūpa, Anurādhapura, attributed to first century B.C. Figure 23 in J. Irwin, "The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis."
12. "Cross section of the ideal Dāgoba or Chorten" (showing correspondences to the 37 *bodhipakṣivadharma*s), figure 13 in Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Psycho-Cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa* (Emeryville, California, Dharma Press, 1976).

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