

## **THE CONCEPT OF STŪPA IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM**

Dr. Milind Jiwane<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

In India, where the relics of Buddha or other sage monks are a kind of shrine housed. Most of Stūpas are usually dome- or mound-like shaped. The first Stūpas were built in India after Buddha's death, when his ashes were divided into eight parts and eight Stūpas were erected in eight districts to hold the Buddha's relics. In the third century B.C.E., Samrat Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty supported and protected Buddhism and erected Stūpas and stone pillars at sites associated with Buddha. According to Buddhist legend, Samrat Ashoka divided the Buddha's ashes that were housed by seven of the eight Stūpas among eighty-four thousand Stūpas that he erected throughout India. Among the oldest surviving Stūpas is the one at Sanchi in central India called the Great Stūpa? Stūpas were made of brick or stone, and their construction and maintenance were considered meritorious deeds that produced benefit.

Lay believers held Stūpas in deep reverence, and contributed to their construction. According to some scholars, the monks were originally indifferent to such Stūpa veneration and the Mahayana movement began with a group of Buddhist believers who practiced Stūpa worship. In the third century B.C.E., Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka along with the practice and techniques of Stūpa construction. Southern, or Theravada, Buddhism was first transmitted to Sri Lanka and from there spread to Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand. The Stūpas of these countries are known to Westerners as pagodas, and in Myanmar and Thailand they are bell-shaped. Northern Buddhism made its way into Central Asia, China, and Japan, where Stūpas, or pagodas, and other types of Buddhist architecture were introduced. The pagodas of China are multi-

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<sup>1</sup> Nagpur (India), H.Q. Jeewak Welfare Society Premises, Naya Nakasha,  
Opposite Swatik school, Nagpur 440017 (India) [dr.milindjiwane@yahoo.com](mailto:dr.milindjiwane@yahoo.com)/  
[Dr.milindjiwane@gmail.com](mailto:Dr.milindjiwane@gmail.com)

leveled, tower like structures, the architectural style of which has been traced to Stūpas of the Gandharan era of Indian Buddhist art and architecture. *Sotoba* or *toba*, a wooden memorial tablet bearing inscriptions set up at gravesites in Japan to honor the deceased, is the Japanese transliteration of the word Stūpa. It can also be in pagoda.

### **The Branches of Buddhism**

Two major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized: Theravada ("The School of the Elders") and Mahayana ("The Great Vehicle"). Theravada has a widespread following in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar etc.). Mahayana is found throughout East Asia (China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan etc.) and includes the traditions of Pure Land, Zen, Nichiren Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Shingon, and Tiantai (Tendai). In some classifications, Vajrayana practiced mainly in Tibet and Mongolia, and adjacent parts of China and is recognized as a third branch, with a body of teachings attributed to Indian siddhas, while others classify it as a part of Mahayana.

While Buddhism is practiced primarily in Asia, both major branches are now found throughout the world. Estimates of Buddhists worldwide vary significantly depending on the way Buddhist adherence is defined. Estimates range from 350 million to 1.6 billion, with 350–550 million the most widely accepted figure. Buddhism is also recognized as one of the fastest growing religions in the world.

### **Opinions of Different Authors**

According to "Buddhist Art & Architecture" by Robert E. Fisher, the Stūpa is one of three main types of Buddhist buildings. (The other two are the residence hall (vihara) and the hall of worship (chaitya).

Early Stūpas were solid inside and patterned after Hindu burial mounds. They were typically a dome set upon a low platform with a single pillar emerging from the top which had 3 umbrella-like discs covering the pillar.

The 3 umbrellas came to symbolize the Three Jewels of Buddhism. (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha). With the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, the practice of circumambulation was not prevalent (with Mahayanist Buddhists) as sacred items were placed in the worship hall and worshiped from the front only as the back of the hall would be blocked off for secret rituals. Robert E. Fisher notes too regarding a change in style of Stūpa at Ajanta, India:

As Sri Lanka was established as a stronghold for Theravada Buddhism, a change in Stūpa shape (from the original Indian Stūpas) was noted, as in the sputa in Anuradhapura, in that the body of the Stūpa became bell shaped and the traditional spire became enlarged and was compared to the graceful tower of a medieval Hindu temple. Robert E. Fisher writes that "according to some" the enlargement of the traditional spire was an effort by Singhalese builders to join two symbols, the pillar of the world and the heights of Mt. Meru. Mr. Fisher writes regarding the Sri Lankan style: Similar proportions, the dominant bell-shaped *andas*, prominent *harmikas* (small platform with railing) and tapered spires are retained in later Stūpas in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. Theravada Buddhism, with its more limited pantheon and emphasis upon direct action, unlike the salvationist beliefs and spectacular heavens of the Mahayana is perfectly served by the clean, uncomplicated forms and geometric harmonies of the Sri Lankan Stūpa.

The book notes across Asia, the Stūpa assumed a variety of regional forms. Thai and Burmese Stūpas were tall and graceful. In Vietnam and Cambodia, separate Stūpas rarely appeared as temples were built into mountainsides; but sometimes small "votive" style Stūpas were built inside those temples. In Java, small Stūpas decorated the terraces of the temples. The book does go on in quite a bit more detail regarding changes in the look of Stūpas including the change to open, wooden Stūpas in the Far East, where they were called pagodas. It was also noted that later styles of Stūpas typically did not contain sacred relics and were not always built inside walled enclosures. They became more decorative and less sacred.

