The Buddhist Stupa: Yoga's Sacred Architecture

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In every part of the world the landscape has its own distinctive appearance, shaped both by the forces of nature and the design of mankind. To the natural scene - mountains, hills, plains, barren deserts or lush forests - human beings contribute architectural features of many kinds: mud huts, magnificent pyramids, soaring church spires or the modern clusters of skyscrapers.

Since its beginnings in India, Buddhism has spread over an area extending from the deserts of Central Asia in the west to the islands of Japan in the east, and from the icy regions of Tibet in the north to the sun-drenched tropical island of Sri Lanka in the south. The natural features of all these regions are very different, and so are their architectural features. But wherever you travel throughout this vast area, there is one type of architectural monument which is everywhere; whether on bleak mountain tops, in pleasant valleys, in the midst of vast plains, or even by the seashore. This ubiquitous Buddhist monument is the stupa.

There is an interesting legend behind the origin of the stupa. The ancient text 'Maha-parinibbana Sutta' tells us that it was the Buddha himself who outlined the basic design of the stupa. The story begins at Buddha's deathbed. When he realized that death was imminent, Buddha gave instructions about the disposition of his body. He said that his body should be cremated, and the relics divided up and enclosed in four different monuments. These monuments were to be erected at the following places, marking important milestones in the Buddha's spiritual journey:

1). Lumbini: The place of Buddha's birth.

2). Bodhgaya: Where the Buddha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree.

3). Sarnath: Where he gave his first teaching.
His intrigued disciples naturally asked what form this monument should take. In reply the Buddha did not say anything, but gave a practical demonstration. He took his outer yellow robe folded it in two and two until it formed a rough cube. Then he took his begging-bowl, which of course was round, turned it upside down, and put it on top of the robes. ‘Make the stupa like this,’ he said. Indeed till today, whatever its geographical location, the basic form of the stupa retains this elemental character.

Fundamentally, a stupa is essentially made up of the following five constituents:

a). A square base
b). A hemispherical dome
c). A conical spire
d). A crescent moon
e). A circular disc

Each of these components is rich in metaphoric content and is identified with one of the five cosmic elements said to make up the entire manifested existence. These are earth, water, fire, air and space.
**Square Base:** This symbolizes the element earth. The phenomenal world spreads out in the four directions and the square with its four sides is an appropriate metaphor for the same. These four directions define the earth and bind it in order. Hence the square is the perfect symbol to denote the terrestrial world. Often a stupa would have four gates, one for each direction, and various deities protecting the specific directions would stand guard over them.

**The Hemispherical Dome:** The main mass of the classical form of the stupa consists of a solid, hemispherical dome. Early Buddhist texts refer to this as the garbha, meaning 'womb' or 'container.' With this reference the stupa as a whole is called the 'dhatu-garbha.' Dhatu is Sanskrit for element. Herein lies the derivation of the word 'dagoba,' which is the short form of dhatu-garbha and which is the most usual designation of the stupa in Sri Lanka. Thus this section of a stupa is an allusion to the primordial, creative waters. Indeed in all the major cosmologies, life arose from the archetypal waters, a female symbol of formless potentiality. The dome by virtue of representing the womb from which issues all manifested existence signifies this creative matrix.

In a beautiful ritual of devotion, the hemisphere of the stupa is identified with the golden cosmic egg of Yogic thought called 'Hiranyagarbha.'

Hiranya is Sanskrit for golden and garbha, as mentioned above, means womb. According to Vedic cosmology, this golden womb was the nucleus from which all creation evolved. As a matter of fact it was often the practice to carve small recesses in the curved wall of the stupa to hold rows of oil lamps, so that the whole mound may be illuminated at night. The effect was to render the abstract concept of the golden womb or egg into a visible reality.
The dome is a symbol of both the womb and the tomb. According to Buddhist thought, before we are invested with a material body our souls are free and fully alive in the spiritual world. Our physical conception in the womb follows our death in the spiritual realm. The womb is thus the symbol of the tomb. This is the metaphysical counterpart of the historical view that the stupa evolved out of the ancient funerary mound. In this context the stupa is often referred to as the 'chaitya,' a word which is derived from the Sanskrit word for funeral pyre 'chita.'

The Conical Spire: This signifies the element of fire. Fire, of course, always rises upwards. When we kindle a fire it never burns downwards but always goes straight up. So fire symbolizes energy ascending upwards. It represents wisdom which burns away all ignorance.

The Crescent Moon: This denotes the element of air. Air has the capacity to expand. The female of the species shares this property with air. This is exemplified in the expansion of a pregnant woman. Indeed the crescent moon is an ancient symbol denoting femininity since the waxing and waning of the moon is said to mirror a woman's menstrual cycle.

The Circle: The perfect shape of the circle expresses wholeness and totality. It represents the principle which has no end or beginning. It thus signifies the element of space.

Finally crowning the apex of the stupa is a jewel like shape. This surmounts all the five elements and hence expresses a higher state of reality than that characterized by these elements.

This protruding jewel is found not only on top of stupas but also crowns the heads of Buddha-images of all countries and all periods. This is the ushnisha which sometimes looks like a flame springing from Buddha's head, and sometimes like a lotus bud growing there.

This protuberance signifies the Highest Reality, namely the Enlightenment of the Great Buddha himself. Hence in a sense, the journey to the stupa's top is a process of spiritual ascension, where the jewel lying at the end of the quest is Nirvana itself.
The identification of the highest point in the stupa with the highest point in Buddha's image leads us to ponder as to whether a more deeper correspondence can be established between the stupa and Buddha's physical body. According to Yogic thought, the five elements are correlated with the five psychic centers within the human body. This correlation is as follows:

1). The earth (prithvi) is the lowest psychic center. This is located between the feet and the knees.
2). Water (apas) lies between the knees and the anus.
3). Fire (agni) lies between the anus and the heart.
4). Air (vayu) lies between the heart and the middle of the eyebrows.
5). Space (akasha) lies between the middle of the eyebrows to the top of the head.

Finally above the head is the final seat of enlightenment. This is identified with the Sahasrara chakra, which is said to be the seat of pure consciousness or ultimate bliss. This is the Buddha's ushnisha.

According to the principles of yoga, our composite selves are made of two superimposing constituents. These are the physical self, known as the gross body, and the other is the higher self, which is the microcosm of the universe, known as the subtle body. The subtle and the gross bodies are both analogues of each other. We have seen above how the subtle body is presented in the stupa.

The Buddha's physical form too finds an echo in the stupa. In such a visualization, the base is Buddha's legs, the dome is his torso, and to represent the head a second cubical structure is added between the dome and the spire. This cube known as the harmika is exactly at the place where Buddha's eyes should be. This can be seen in the typical stupas of Nepal where, on each side of the harmika, a pair of eyes is painted.
Conclusion

There is an amusing story told about an old man who had led a rather negative and unhelpful life, marked by constant conflicts over petty matters. Nevertheless, he wanted to become a monk for good luck. The head monks, however hard they tried, were having difficulty ordaining him, since tradition decreed that a prospective candidate for priesthood need to have performed at least one good deed. Mobilizing all their clairvoyant powers and searching even his former lives, they could find no good deed.

Not wanting to give up, the compassionate monks then took him to see the Buddha himself. Now the Buddha's power of clairvoyance was far more powerful than even the most saintliest of his followers. Looking back the man's many, many lifetimes the Buddha finally said, 'Ah! It's all right, you can ordain him - I've found something good in his past.' 'What is it?' they enquired. The Buddha replied, 'Long ago, he was reborn as an ant, and he came with his clan to the great stupa of Bodhnath (Nepal), where some people had gathered to pay homage to the monument. At the moment when the head of the family began his pious circumambulations, our man here was crawling across his boot, trying to get more crumbs. He was able to hang on to the boot while the pilgrim made it three times around the stupa! This was a meritorious deed, good enough to gain a monkhood for him.'

In the traditional view, a building needs to satisfy both the physical and metaphysical needs of man. As an expression of artistic intent, it will elaborate upon the manner in which phenomenal world relates to the spiritual one. Architecture being by nature three-dimensional is eminently suitable to act as a metaphor, since any construct is bound to be rooted in the phenomenal world, and then must begin the ascent to the Higher levels.

The stupa by virtue of being the monument of Buddha's choice is deemed especially sacred as exemplified in the above story. The spiritual merit of this monument is enhanced no less by it being a reflection of the Cosmic Man, visualized in the ideals of Yoga, who resides in each of us.

References and Further Reading

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