

THE HISTORICAL AND SYMBOLICAL ORIGIN OF THE CHORTEN

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The mysteries of life and death were always the greatest agents of religious ritual and speculation. Through the experience of death man becomes conscious of life. Thus the cult of the dead stimulated primitive man to build the first great monuments (tumuli), while the other side of religious activity, which was concerned with the living and the mundane aspects of life, found expression in the simpler forms of tree-and fire-worship. The tumuli originating from the burial mound, were massive structures of stone, taking the forms of hemispheres, cones, pyramids and similar plain stereometrical bodies, containing small cells which preserved the bodily remains and other relics of heroes, saints, kings and similar great personalities. In India, as in many other parts of Asia, the hemispheric form seems to have been the prevalent type of such monuments. According to the oldest tradition they were erected for great rulers (*cakravartin*), as the Buddha himself mentions in his conversation with Ananda (*DighaNikaya XVI, 5*).

While the tumuli and the cult of the dead had their place outside the village, the sanctuary of the life-giving and life-preserving forces (personified in the sun-god) had its place in the centre of the village. It consisted of a simple altar (a sanctified form of the domestic hearth, the fire of which was always regarded sacred as a symbol of family life) or a small shrine (an idealized form of the village hut) which stood in the shadow of the sacred tree (the Tree of Life) and was surrounded by a fence as a demarcation of the sacred place.

The Buddhist *stupa* combined the elements of the village sanctuary with the monumental dome of the ancient tumulus (*caitya*), thus uniting the two oldest traditions of humanity, as expressed in the lunar and solar cult, fusing them into one universal symbol which recognized formally for the first time that life and death are only two sides of the same reality, complementing and conditioning each other. To think of them as separate is illusion, and only as long as the veil of *Maya* has not been lifted, the worship of these two forces proceeds separately, sometimes even as two separate forms of religion. But once it has been understood that there is no life without transformation, and that the power of transformation is the essence of life - then the great synthesis takes place and the foundation of a world-religion is established.

The Buddhist *stupa* originally consisted of an almost hemispherical tumulus and an altar-like structure (*harmika*) on its top, surmounted by one or several superimposed honorific umbrellas. The flattened hemisphere was compared to an egg and therefore called "*anda*", a term which did not only allude to the shape (which was also compared to a water-bubble) but to its deeper significance as well, namely, as a symbol of latent creative power, while the quadrangular *harmika* on the summit of the cupola symbolized the sanctuary enthroned above the world (*anda* was also a synonym of the universe in the oldest Indian mythology) beyond death and rebirth. A similar parallelism exists between the *harmika* in the shade of the sacred tree, because the Holy One, whose ashes were enshrined in the altarlike sanctuary of the *harmika*, instead of sacrificing other beings, had sacrificed himself for the welfare of all living beings. According to the Buddha there is only *one* sacrifice which is of real value, the sacrifice of our own desires, our won 'self'. The ultimate form of such a sacrifice is that of a Bodhisattva, who renounces even the ultimate peace of final *nirvana* (*Parinirvana*) until he has helped his fellow-beings to find the path of liberation.

The honorific umbrella finally, as an abstract representation of the shade-giving tree- in this case the sacred Tree of Life - is one of the chief solar symbols, and in Buddhism that of Enlightenment (*samyak-sambodhi*). The importance of this symbol becomes clear from the Buddhist Scriptures, describing the struggle of the Buddha and Mara, the Evil One, for the place under the Bodhi Tree, the holiest spot in the world, later on known as the Diamond Throne (*vajrasana*, Tib. *rDo-rje gdan*).

It must have been an old custom that the head of the community had his seat of honour under the sacred tree in the centre of the settlement where public meetings used to take place on religious and other important occasions. Consequently the umbrella, which replaced the tree when the head of the community moved about or presided over similar functions in other places, later on became one of the insignia of royalty. In order to mark the distinctions in rank the ceremonial umbrella was doubled or trebled, or increased by even greater numbers of umbrellas, which were fixed one above the other, thus transforming the umbrella back again to the original tree-shape with its numerous layers of branches spreading around the stem and gradually getting shorter towards the top.

In order to understand the transformation of the ancient reliquary-tumulus into the universal conception of the *Caitya*, from which

later the Tibetan Chorten (*mChod-rtan*) developed, we must have a look at the earliest known Buddhist Stupa at Sanchi. The great Sanchi Stupa was crowned by a threefold honorific umbrella and the altar-shrine on top of the hemispherical main structure was surrounded by a railing (*vedika*), exactly as in the case of the village sanctuary. Similar railings were repeated at the foot of the *stupa* and on the low circular-terrace upon which the flattened hemisphere rested. The lowest railing was provided with four gateways (*torana*) which opened towards the east, the south, the west & the north, emphasizing the universal character of Buddhism which is open to all the four quarters of the universe and invites all mankind with the call "Come and see!", and which exhorts its followers to open their hearts to all that lives, while radiating love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity towards the whole world. The inner space between the stone railing and the *stupa*, as well as the circular terrace (*medhi*) at the base of the cupola were used as *pradaksina patha* for ritual circumambulation in the direction of the sun's course. The orientation of the gates equally corresponds to the sun's course: to sunrise, zenith, sunset, nadir. Just as the sun illuminates the physical world, so does the Buddha, the Enlightened One, illuminate the spiritual world. The eastern gateway represents his birth, the southern (which was regarded as the most important and therefore built first) his enlightenment, the western his "setting in motion the Wheel of the Law" (*dharmacakra pravartana*); the proclamation of his doctrine, and the northern his final liberation (*pariniravana*).

This universal attitude and orientation remained one of the characteristics of the *stupa*, especially in the northern countries of Buddhism, like Tibet, even after railings and gateways had disappeared. In the course of time all these details were fused into a quadrangular substructure, which finally took the form of four terraces (sometimes furnished with four staircases, if the size of the monument permitted or required them) upon which the hemisphere was raised.

As the layers of superimposed umbrellas became more numerous they were transformed into the more architectural shape of a solid cone with a corresponding number of horizontal notches, which finally amounted to thirteen. With this transformation the original idea of the Tree of Life and Enlightenment was visibly restored and steadily gained in importance. That the conical spire was no more regarded as a set of umbrellas, can be seen from the fact that later on an honorific umbrella was again fixed on top of the cone.

The different strata of the cone (separated by horizontal notches) were now explained to correspond to certain psychic faculties or stages of consciousness on the way to enlightenment and to their respective world-planes. Thus the spiritual rebirth of the world starts in the mind of man, and the Tree of Life grows out of his own heart, the centre of his world, and spreads into ever new infinities, into ever higher and purer realms, until it has turned into a Tree of Enlightenment.

“Verily, I tell you”, the Buddha once addressed his disciples, “the world is within this six feet high body !” And on another occasion he defined the world in these words: “That in the world through which one, perceiving the world, arrives at his conception of the world, that in the Order of the Blessed One is called ‘the world’.” (*Samyutta Nikaya* IV, 35, 166).

In other words, the universe, according to the Buddha’s definition, is the universe of our conscious experience. The symbolism of the *stupa*, therefore, can be read in the cosmic as well as in the psychic sense; its synthesis is the psycho-cosmic image of Man, in which the physical elements and laws of nature and their spiritual counterparts, the different world-planes and their corresponding stages of consciousness, as well as that which transcends them, have their place. That such ideas go back to the earliest periods of Indian history can be seen from representations of the ancient Jain world system in the shape of a human figure.

Nepalese *stupas*, which in many respects have preserved archaic features, decorate the *harmika* (the cubic structure above the cupola) with painted human eyes, thus suggesting a human figure in the posture of meditation hidden in the *stupa*: the crossed legs in the base, the body up to the shoulders in the hemisphere, the head in the *harmika*. This also corresponds to the psycho-physical doctrine of the centres of psychic force (*cakra*) which are located one above the other in the human body, and through which consciousness develops in an ascending order: from the experience of material sense-objects through that of the immaterial worlds of pure mental objects, up to the supramundane consciousness of enlightenment, which has its base in the crown-*cakra* of the head (*sahasrara*). This *cakra* is symbolized by a dome-shaped or flame-like protuberance on the head of the Buddha, and by the cone-shaped Tree of Enlightenment which forms the spire of the *stupa* or the *Chorten*, or its various equivalents, like the *dagobas* (*dhatu-garbha*) of Ceylon or the *pagodas* (a reversal of the word *dagoba*) in Burma, Thailand and Indo-China.

The *cakra* itself is a sun symbol. It was one of the attributes of the sun-god, either in the form of a discus or in the form of the wheel, representing the rolling sun-chariot. The solar origin is testified by the description of the flaming and radiating wheel which appears in the sky with its thousand spokes (rays) when a virtuous ruler has established a reign of righteousness and has attained the spiritual power which entitles and enables him to extend the Good Law (*dharmā*) over the whole world and to become a world-ruler (*cakravartin*). Similarly, the "turning of the Wheel of the Good Law" has become a synonym for the Buddha's first proclamation of his doctrine (*dharmā-chakra-pravartana-sūtra*), by which the thousand-spoked sun-wheel of the universal law was set in motion, radiating its light throughout the world.

Thus the Buddha himself was a *cakravartin*, though not in the ordinary sense, but as one who has conquered the world within himself by realizing the highest faculties of his mind in the thousand fold *cakra* of his spiritual centre (*sahasrara-cakra*). The Buddha, therefore, rightly demanded that the remains of the Enlightened Ones and their true disciples should be treated with the same respect and veneration as those of a *cakravartin*.

"As they treat the remains of a king of kings, so, Ananda, should they treat the remains of a *Tathagata*. At the four crossroads a cairn should be erected to the *Tathagata*. And whosoever shall there place garlands or perfumes or paints, or make salutation there, or become in its presence calm in heart, that shall long be to them for a profit and joy." (*Digha Nikaya*, VI, 5).

The *cakras* as radiating centres of psychic-force gave a new impetus to the interpretation of the human body as a cosmic manifestation. Not only was the spinal column compared to Mount Meru, the axis of the universe, and therefore called '*meru-danda*' but the whole psycho-physical organism was explained in terms of solar and lunar forces, which through fine channels, the so-called *nadis*, moved up and down between the seven *cakras*, which in their turn represented the elementary qualities of which the universe is built and of which the material elements are only the visible reflexes.

The unity of body and mind, and consequently the inclusion of the body into the spiritual training, so that the body actually participates in the highest experiences and achievements, has always been a characteristic feature of Buddhist psychology and meditative practice. While describing the four states of deep absorption (in Pali: *jhāna*, and often,

though incorrectly, translated as “trances”), the Buddha in the 77th discourse of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, for instance, adds to the explanation of each of these fundamental stages of meditation: “And he (who has attained the first, second or third degree of absorption) penetrates and permeates, fills and saturates his body with the bliss of unification and serenity, so that not even the smallest particle of his body remains unsaturated by this blissful experience.”

Thus, in early Buddhism as well as in the later Tibetan *yoga* and Tantric practices, bodily harmony was both the effect and the *conditio sine qua non* of all higher spiritual attainments. In Tantric terminology: liberation and enlightenment are attained by the reconciliation of solar and lunar forces which on the physical plane are the two kinds of vital energy, on the psychic plane the intellectual and the emotional consciousness, and on the spiritual, i.e. most sublime plane, wisdom (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*).

On the basis of this profound parallelism transcendental ideas and psychic processes could be expressed by material equivalents, either in terms of the human body (as in *cakras*, *nadis*, *mudras*, *asanas*) or in terms of colours, elements and architectural forms. Thus, the Buddha, when speaking about the four great elements (*mahabhuta*) or states of aggregation, distinguished in each case between a subjective and an objective aspect, namely, the elementary qualities of matter in their vital forms, as represented by the organs and functions of the human body* and in their fundamental or abstract forms, as the solid, the fluid, the fiery and the gaseous state of inorganic matter. The realization of the fundamental laws of the universe and of one's own nature through the observation of bodily functions plays an important role in the Buddhist system of meditation and is one of the four pillars of insight (*Satipatthana*).

*The following passage from *Majjhima Nikaya* 28, may serve as an example: “What is the ‘heating element’ (*tejodhatu*)?—The heating element may be subjective or it may be objective. And what is the subjective heating element? The dependent properties which on one's own person and body are heating and radiating, as that whereby one is heated, consumed, scorched, whereby that which has been eaten, drunk, chewed or tasted, is fully digested, or whatever other dependent properties which on one's own person and body are heating and radiating—this is called the subjective heating element.”

By carrying on this tradition, the same parallelism was established with respect to the psychic organism whose vital centres (*cakras*) were found to correspond to the elementary qualities of matter: the basic vital centre or "root support" (*muladhara-cakra*), situated in the perineum at the base of the spinal column, (which latter represents the Tree of Life**) and corresponding to the element Earth, the solid state; the navel-centre (*manipura-cakra*) to the element Water, the fluid state; the heart-centre (*anahata-cakra*) to the element Fire, the heating, incandescent or radiating state; the throat-centre (*visuddha-cakra*) to the element Air, the gaseous state; and the centre on the crown of the head (*sahasrara-cakra*) to the element Ether (or in its passive aspect; Space), the state of vibration.

Each of these elements is symbolized by a sound (*bija-mantra*, a mystic syllable of creative power), a colour and a basic form. The latter two are of special interest to us, as they have been directly applied to the architecture of the *mChod-rten*. Earth is represented by a yellow cube, Water by a white sphere or a white round pot, Fire by a triangular body of either round or square base, i.e. a cone or, less frequently, a pyramid. Air is represented two dimensionally as a semi-circular bow-shaped form of green colour, three-dimensionally as a hemisphere with the base upwards, like a cup. Ether is graphically represented by a

**Mount Meru and the Tree of Life have become identical in the course of time, in fact the whole Meru was imagined to have the form of a mighty tree, composed of many storeys of circular terraces, comparable to the rings of a *stupa's* conical spire. (The horizontal layers of Mount Kailas, the terrestrial replica of Meru, give further emphasis to this conception and its symbolism.) In the Tibetan treatise on the Yoga of Psychic Heat (*gTum-mo*) we are told that the "median nerve" (*susumna* Tib; *dBu-ma rTsa*) in its perpendicular straightness symbolizes the trunk of the Tree of Life from which the various *cakras* branch out and open up like lotus blossoms. From each *cakra* a great number of subsidiary psychic nerves radiate upwards and downwards, "appearing like the ribs of a parasol or like the spokes in the wheel of a chariot". This passage again shows the close symbolical relationship between parasol, wheel, lotus (*padma* is another name applied to psychic centre, which are generally represented as lotus blossoms) and tree, all of which are related to the sun. It may be mentioned in this connection that the Buddhist interpretation of the *cakras* differs from that of the Hindu tradition, as demonstrated in my "FOUNDATION OF TIBETAN MYSTICISM". (Rider, London)

small acuminated circle or blue dot (*bindu*) and appears in three-dimensional form as a multi-coloured flaming jewel, i.e., a small sphere from which a flame emerges.

If we put all these elements together in due order, namely, the sphere upon the cube, a cone or a pyramid upon the sphere, and upon the cone or pyramid a cup-like hemisphere which carries a flaming drop on its plane surface—then we get the ideal figure or the abstract stereometrical form which represents the basic principles of *stupa*-architecture, as preserved in the Tibetan *Chorten* as well as in the Japanese *Sotoba*. In the *Chorten* the central cupola of the Indian *stupa* has been reversed into a vase-or pot-shaped vessel (Tib.: *bum-pa*) which rests on a cubic substructure and is crowned by a tall cone, ending in a small upturned hemisphere, which carries on its plane surface a crescent, a sundisc and the 'flaming jewel', one upon the other.

In addition to this, the main parts of the *Chorten* are generally given the colours of the 'great elements' (*mahabhuta*): the cubical sub-structure yellow (Earth), the pot-shaped central part white (Water), the conical spire red (Fire), while the fourth element (Air) which should show a green surface, is generally hidden under the honorific umbrella, a symbol which, especially in its Tibetan form, is closely connected with the concept of Air. Without taking into account its tree-origin and its natural relationship to sun, air and sky, it may be mentioned that according to the later Indian and Tibetan tradition honorific umbrellas were supposed to appear in the sky, when a saint had realized certain magic powers. Between the umbrella and the flaming drop (Tib.: *thig-le*), the respective symbols of Air and Ether, there is a white crescent, in whose inner curve rests a red sundisc. They repeat the colours of the two main elements of the *Chorten*, namely that of the moon-related, waterpot-shaped central part and that of the sun-related conical spire. The meaning of this repetition becomes evident if we remember the role of the lunar and solar forces moving through the main channels or *nadis* of the psycho-physical organism of man. The most important one runs through the spinal column and is called *susumna* (*dbu-ma rtsa* in Tibetan), while *ida* (Tib.: *rkyang-ma rtsa*) and *pingala* (Tib.: *ro-ma rtsa*) coil round the central channel in opposite directions, the pale white-coloured *ida* starting from the left (or, according to Tibetan tradition, controlling the left side of the human body), the redcoloured *pingala* from the right (or controlling the right side). *ida* is the conductor of the lunar or 'moon-like' (*candrasvarupa*) forces, which have the regenerative properties and the unity of undifferentiated subconscious life, as represented by the latent creativeness of

seed, egg and semen, in which all chthonic-telluric cults are centred. *Pingala* is the vehicle of solar forces (*surya-svarupa*), which have the properties of intellectual activity, representing the conscious, differentiated individualized life. Individualisation, however, if separating itself from its origin, is as death-spelling as knowledge severed from the sources of life. This is why wisdom and compassion (*prajna* and *karuna*) must be united for the attainment of liberation. And for the same reason *pingala*, the solar energy, without the regenerating influence of *ida*, the lunar energy, acts like a poison, while even the elixir of immortality (*amrita*), to which the regenerating lunar energy is compared, has no value without the light of knowledge.

It is for this reason that only when the solar and lunar energies are united in the central channel, the *susumna*, and carried up from the root-centre (*muladhara-cakra*) through all the other centres of psychic power and consciousness until they reach the universal level in the Thousand-Petalled Lotus of the *sahasrara-cakra*, that the final integration of these two forces takes place and results in the ultimate state of Illumination (*samyak-sambodhi*). In the spherical and conical parts of the *Chorten* the two currents of psychic energy are represented by their separate and elementary aspects; in the crescent and the sun-disc they are represented in their sublimated or spiritualized form as knowledge (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*), from the union of which the dazzling flame-jewel of perfect enlightenment is born. This symbol of unity and ultimate reality has its latent counterpart in the form of a blue dot (*bindu*; Tib.: *thig-le*) or seed (*bija*), the creative germ or spiritual potentiality, inherent in every sentient being as the potential consciousness of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*; Tib.: *byahng chub-sems*). The unfolding of this latent principle is the aim of the spiritual path, which is achieved when all our psychic faculties as embodied in the various centres—are permeated by it. When the mystic union between the sun of knowledge and the moon of compassion has reached its zenith and consummation on the highest spiritual plane, the Thousand-Petalled Lotus, then it comes to pass that the dark seed, containing the essence of the universe and the ever-present reality of the *dharma-dhatu*, breaks open and bursts forth into the dazzling flame of enlightenment, the crowning symbol of the most universal type of the Tibetan *Chorten*.