

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PAGODA

The stupa, or the Pagoda is an indispensable feature of almost every Buddhist Temple all over the world. All stupas including those built in modern times, are supposed to enshrine a particle, in most cases a minute one of the corporeal remains of the Buddha or a Buddhist saint from which they derived their sacred character and the devout Buddhist in worshipping a Stupa containing a relic of the Buddha as if he is worshipping the Buddha himself.

Though stupa is best known as a centre of a popular Buddhist culture it was not an invention of the Buddhists. The oldest canonical writings of the Buddhists contain references to the existence, in the lifetime of the Great Teacher of shrines designated by the term **caitya** (Pali cetiya) which is well-known as a synonym of stupa. The word **cetiya** is derived from the root “ci”-cinati to collect. Originally a **cetiya** was a collection of earth or a mound. Later on it came to mean a tree which grew on a mound. Therefore, **caitya** does not exclusively mean a stupa and the references to it in the Buddhist books make it clear that some of the pre-Buddhist **caityas** were sacred trees used for worship.

We find evidence in Buddhist literature which shows that people were in the habit of worshipping the hair of the Buddha even during his lifetime. For instance, it says that two **upasakas** called Tapassu and Bhaluka having obtained couple of hairs from the Buddha at Buddha Gaya, took it to their country and built a stupa over it and paid homage to it.

In the **Mahaparinibbana Sutta**, the Buddha is represented as saying that there were four classes of people who were worthy of being honoured by having stupas built over their remains, namely Buddhas, pacceka Buddhas, Arahants and universal monarchs.

Jainism, a religion founded by an older contemporary of Buddha had in early time its own stupas which from an architectural point of view did not differ much from the Buddhist stupas of the same age. Actual remains of pre-Buddhist stupas have been found at some places in North India and it is therefore clear that both the Buddhists as well as the Jains adopted the stupas from earlier cults and gave it a new significance by keeping with the tenets of their respective religions.

The stupa was adopted by the early Buddhists of India as a means of honouring the Founder of their faith. As is generally admitted now the image of the Buddha was unknown in the early period of the history of Buddhism and the Master was worshipped by paying homage to various religious symbols

representing him, the objects with which he was associated while he was living, and above all his corporeal remains which were deposited in stupas.

Stupas were built in later times not only to enshrine corporeal relics of the Buddhas or of saints, but also to make the sacred spots at which some important events connected with the religion had taken place, e.g. the spot at which the Buddha delivered his first sermon or where he sat in meditation. Stupas of this class may conveniently be referred as memorials. It is believed that by the time of Asoka stupas containing the relics of Buddha were worshipped in India by faithful Buddhists.

The Stupas in time underwent many important changes in its outward form in India itself while in those lands outside India, it developed on lines peculiar to each country being influenced by the changes in the doctrine, the artistic traditions of the people and various other factors, so that certain stupas which we find in Further India and the Malay Archipelago can hardly be recognised as evolved from the ancient Indian model. King Devenampiyatissa is supposed to have built the first stupa in Ceylon, which, according to tradition, enshrines the collar-bone of Buddha. The stupa known subsequently as the Thuparama is of great sanctity in the estimation of the Buddhists of Ceylon and still one of the principal places of pilgrimage at Anuradhapura. Legends relating to two other stupas in Ceylon claim for them an antiquity even greater than that of Thuparama.

Origin and development of stupas

In a manuscript quoted by Parker, stupas are classified according to the shape of the dome. This authority, in enumerating six types of stupas, states, **Ghantakara** or the bell-shaped, **Ghatakara** – the pot-shaped, **Bubbulakara** – the bubble-shaped, **Dhanyakara** – the heap of paddy-shaped, **Padmakara** – the lotus-shaped, and **Amba** or the **amalaka** shaped. Among these six types the bell-shaped is the commonest in Ceylon at present, but very few examples of this have been noticed among those dating from ancient times.

The Bell-shaped appears also to be the most popular type in Burma as well as in Thailand and the preference for this type among the modern Buddhists in Ceylon is possibly a result of the religious intercourse with Further India and the introduction of the Thai and Burmese ordinations respectively towards the eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century.

The Bubble-shaped type seems to have been the type most favoured by the Buddhists of Ceylon in ancient times. The Thuparama originally was of the heap of the paddy-shape type seem, however, to have existed in ancient Ceylon,

for relic caskets made of crystal in the form of this type of stupa have been found enshrined in some of the old stupas of Ceylon. Stupas of the lotus and Amalaka are not known in Ceylon, even in the miniature form of the relic caskets. Stupas with elongated domes like the Indikatusaya at Mihintale have lotus petal moulding at their bases and it is perhaps those with this architectural ornamentation which were meant by this term, for it is rather difficult to imagine how the dome could have built completely in the shape of a lotus.

In the evolution of the stupa in Ceylon it is the superstructure, i.e. the portion above the dome which underwent considerable development. The terraces and the dome remained during a period of millennium and a half substantially the same and the shrines even of today show very little change so far as these parts of the structure are concerned. But it is otherwise with the superstructure.

