

Chapter II

THE ROLE OF THE BUDDHIST STUPA AND MEDITATIVE PRACTICES IN THE DESIGN OF SACRED ARCHITECTURE ~ WITH REFERENCE TO THE CHORTEN OF ZANSKAR/LADAKH

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Figure 1 : The Chorten in the Landscape - Zanskar/Ladakh, courtesy www.tashidelek.org

IT IS UNFORTUNATE THAT WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY IN WHICH a sociopolitical paradigm of reality increasingly dominates and restricts our perspective. Associated with this view of the world is an implicit ontology that is characterized by a horizontal frame of reference which denies the validity of vertical connection with what, in the traditional perspective,¹ is known as 'the multiple levels of being'. This process, which may be understood as the workings of *samsara* at the societal level, obscures metaphysical reality in its reduction of the world to being nothing more than a social - and thereby arbitrary - construction. In consequence we encounter a world increasingly devoid of metaphysical referent or content.²

That world shows increasing signs of objective sickness as a consequence of Man's *hubris* - as evidenced in the dire global political situation; environmental degradation; mass starvation and poverty; widespread

human rights violation and oppression, and so forth. I believe that these symptoms all stem from the inadequate, implicit, unacknowledged, and mistaken metaphysics that characterizes modern society. Man now seeks to dominate society and nature, and in so doing usurps his proper role that is, from the religious point of view, to be the custodian and guardian of nature and society.³ The cure to this malaise lies in recognizing and treating the source of the problem, which is our increasing ignorance of ourselves and of our true nature. We need to revitalize both our collective and our individual souls through a return to traditional principles, which are of perennial validity. It is in this sense that the exemplar of the Buddhist Stupa and the associated meditative approach to the design and inhabitation of architecture may be appreciated, by virtue of the metaphysical lucidity they reveal.

THE STUPA AS A WORK OF SACRED ARCHITECTURE *PAR EXCELLENCE*

In the traditional Indian view, a building if properly conceived satisfies both a physical and a metaphysical purpose. This view recognizes that we are more than just physical and social entities; we are found to be in part and above all of metaphysical nature. Our psychic (that is, of the psyche) and physical life take place within an ordered Cosmos.⁴

This profound aspect of our being needs to be catered for. In the traditional view, the building - and by extension the entire fabric of the society in which we dwell - caters for our body; for our soul or psyche; and for our spirit.

It does this in three ways:

- firstly it confronts us with our immediate position in the world, in addressing our particular (accidental) mode of being;

- secondly it situates us within a comprehensive and integral structure of the world - that is, the total physical and metaphysical cosmos we inhabit and of which we are an inseparable part; and

- thirdly it mediates metaphysical principle, catering for this essential nature as in the Christian sense of providing a receptacle for Grace.⁵

The Buddhist Stupa is particularly rich in this sense. Its satisfaction of mundane needs is quite clearly secondary to its primary intention of providing for psychic and in particular spiritual needs. By way of example, I shall refer to the numerous stupa or Tibetan chorten (Tib. *mc'od rten*) of Ladakh, Northern India, and of Zaskar/Ladakh in particular. Situated between the two highest mountain ranges in the world, the Himalaya to the south and the Karakoram to the north, and divided in two by the River Indus, Ladakh consists of high barren plateaus situated at between 2500 and 5000 meters altitude, the highest summits reaching over 7000 meters.

In the past, Ladakh established close relations with Lhasa; today the architecture and way of life are very similar to those of the traditional people of Central Tibet. But the area is somewhat unique, in that it has not been desecrated by the Chinese occupation of Tibet, by virtue of being part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

In 1986 I had the pleasure of spending some time in Leh and the Indus valley, and then trekked from Lamayuru to sPadum by way of Lingshed and the Sengge-La (5000m), and thence to Darsha by way of the Shinkun-La (5090m); in the course of this three-week trek, I visited a number of remote Gumpa and encountered a large number of Tibetan Buddhist Chorten. I also had occasion to discuss metaphysics, art and architecture with lamas, with local people in general, and with other visiting scholars.

It became clear that the stupa, despite having no internal space, does provide for the satisfaction of certain mundane needs. The siting of the stupa in the landscape often has much to do with orienting the traveller. For example, the stupa may mark the entry to side valleys, the crossing places of rivers, or the location of mountain passes visible from some distance. In remote uninhabited passes and

valleys, it is a considerable relief to come across such a marker. At the summits of passes in particular, the stupa provides a welcome respite from the climb, and shelter from the sun or wind. They emerge as a welcome structuring of the landscape, making sense of the domain through which the traveller must pass. They often provide pleasant places to rest, and to enjoy the view.

The task of orientation in the landscape (sometimes in conjunction with *mani*-walls) is here an important one - as for example for navigation in the snow when trails are obscured. Nevertheless, the overwhelming sense one has is of their significance as metaphysical icons, as reminders of the orderly cosmos in which one dwells, and the recurrent call to the pilgrim to not weaken in his path.

Snodgrass makes clear the metaphysical intent of the stupa, which is to serve as an adequate symbol of a supra-mundane paradigm. That is, its primary purpose is to serve Humanity intellectually, acting as a support for the contemplation of supra-empirical principles. For example, the building - as an exemplar of Sacred Architecture - expresses the manner in which the phenomenal world relates to the Real and how the One "fragments" into multiplicity. It carries intimations of the non-duality (*advaita*) of the sensible and the supra-sensible domains.

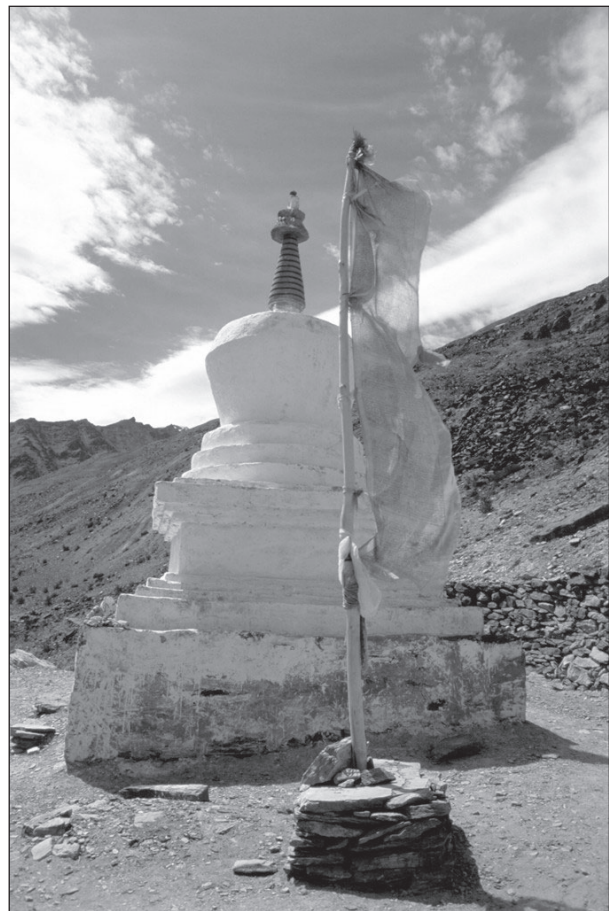


Figure 2 : Zaskari Stupa or Chorten, courtesy Dave Halton and Waddington Photographic

THE STUPA AS MEDITATIVE ICON - THE INNER STUPA

The stupa is a mandala - both in its plan, and in three-dimensions. It functions as a meditative object, both in the specific sense of providing a particular object of contemplation, and also the general schema of the various meditative states of realization. The Stupa is the Pilgrim, and it is the Path; it is the Cosmos; it is the Guru-Rimpoche;⁶ and it is the Buddha. In contemplating its presence, and the meanings it embodies, the pilgrim is reminded of the essential Buddha-nature both of himself and of the Cosmos.

In the Masonic tradition, the building of the temple provides the individual with a metaphor for the realization of his or her Divine nature. In similar fashion, the stupa which is to be built is not the physical object - which merely serves as a means to the end - but the inner stupa - which is visualized in the course of structured meditations - and eventually realized as the meditator's innermost nature.

THE STUPA AS MEDITATIVE PATH AND DOCTRINE

The Stupa further provides the means of this realization, in embodying the very practice of meditation. This process may be approached through the eight arms of yoga, which may conveniently be described in Hindu terms.⁷ Following the five preparatory stages of the *Bahiranga* or external yoga, which are meant to make the *Sadhaka* (pilgrim) fit for the practice of *Samadhi* (enlightenment), the *Antaranga* or internal yoga proceeds by way of concentration, contemplation, and *samadhi* or realization. The outer stages are reflected in the correspondence between the bodily posture assumed in meditation, and the spatial form of the stupa. The stupa is therefore strongly centered, and is articulated about a straight vertical axis (the spine, and *axis mundi*). It rests foursquare upon a stable foundation (the folded legs in the lotus *asana*, and symbolizing the Earth and very ground of being).

According to Patanjali, the first limb of the internal yoga is *Dharana* or Concentration:

*"Concentration is the confining of the mind within a limited mental area (object of concentration)".*⁸ This necessary concentration of the mind is embodied architecturally in the establishment of center and boundary, by demarcation of the sacred precinct in the ritual laying-out of the mandala plan within the circle and square, and expressed in the outer railings and those of the *harmika* where these exist. The strong centeredness of the structure as a whole is reinforced by its axially, and this concentration is most emphasized in the cupola or *anda*.

The second limb of the internal yoga is *Dhyana* or Contemplation:

*"Uninterrupted flow (of the mind) towards the object (chosen for meditation) is contemplation".*⁹ The centrality and axially of the stupa express architecturally the inward and upward movement of this contemplative approach to the center of being. The vertical axially may also be taken to represent the arising of the Serpent Power through the

various chakras in the practice of Kundalini Yoga.

The third limb of the internal yoga is that of *Samadhi*: *"The same (contemplation) when there is consciousness only of the object of contemplation and not of itself (the mind) is Samadhi"*.¹⁰ This contemplative serenity is expressed in the balance and self-sufficiency of the composition.

"The three taken together constitute Samyama".¹¹

Dharana, *Dhaya*, and *Samadhi* are really phases of the same mental process of Realization, each succeeding stage differing from the preceding in the depth of concentration that has been attained and the more complete isolation of the object of contemplation from the distractions. The vertical stratification of the whole and of the cone of world levels thus represents these varying levels of the Heavens and of consciousness and being, with the ultimate *Samadhi* or *Nirvana* being represented by the flaming drop at the topmost point.

The initial inward and upward movement towards the center reaches the center, through which it passes, and conceptually ascends the vertical axis to higher centers - which process is also a more inward progression. This inward and upward sequence is in metaphysical terms the movement through the multiple levels of being. Each horizontal level or spherical shell is a center to the levels below or without; in turn it gives way to a higher and more inward center. This movement through each center is the repeated progression from *Samprajnata Samadhi*¹² - where there is a *Pratyaya* or seed in the field of consciousness and the consciousness is fully directed to it. This gives way to *Asamprajnata Samadhi* where there is no *Pratyaya*, and therefore nothing to draw the consciousness outwards and hold it there. As soon as the *Pratyaya* is dropped or suppressed, the consciousness begins to recede automatically to its center. After passing momentarily through this *Laya* center, it tends to emerge into the next subtler vehicle. When this process has been completed, the *Pratyaya* of the next higher plane appears, and the direction of consciousness again becomes from the center outwards. From the time the *Pratyaya* is suppressed, to the time when the *Pratyaya* of the next level appears, the Yogi is in the state of *Asamprajnata Samadhi*. During all this time he or she is fully conscious, and the will is directing this delicate mental operation in a very subtle manner.¹³

The stupa therefore teaches the path that is to be followed, in representing the various modes of meditation and levels of realization. The path of the meditator is enshrined in the form of the stupa and in its circumambulation. The pilgrim walks clockwise around the structure in reflection of the Sun's progress around the sky, and of his own progress through the eternal rounds of *samsara* and becoming. Conceptually the pilgrim moves inward and upward, through repeated immersion of consciousness in *Samadhi*, until eventually becoming fully established in that state, having passed through that Sacred portal, the Sun-Door¹⁴ -

"from whence there is no returning".

THE ROLE OF MEDITATION IN THE DESIGN OF SACRED ARCHITECTURE

In the design process of the design of sacred architecture, be it Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Moslem, or Taoist, the quality of consciousness of the architect and artisan is considered to be of considerable importance. In a sense, the quality or effectiveness of the work of Sacred Art is a function of the Wisdom or Science of those involved in the design, and the knowledge or craft or the art of those involved in its manufacture. It is therefore critical that the consciousness of the architect is not defiled by distracting or foreign influences. This is achieved through meditative practices, by establishing in the inner mind the archetypal sacred space - which the visualizing of the Mandala and the Stupa reenacts. Further, in terms of the essential import of the work, it may be regarded that the quality of Sacrality present within the work is to a degree a function of the quality of consciousness realized by the artist or architect in preparing the work. The inner task is to ascend through the center of being toward the Godhead as far as one is able, to receive the gifts of Grace, and to bring these back as spiritual gifts to the people. At the same time the dangers of egoism in this approach are circumvented by the traditional teachings and *modus operandi*.

In essence, the design and making of a work of sacred architecture is a spiritual undertaking. It needs to be pursued as a spiritual discipline. In this discipline, meditation is the most important means of clarifying the consciousness and of providing the vessel for the realization of spiritual purity within and through the artifact. This purity prepares a fitting "dwelling place" for the God who, in the act of consecration, is entreated to reside within. This purity is then actualized by virtue of the worshipper's spiritual practices and clarity.

Thus in the meditative process of design, having familiarized himself with the brief, the architect first composes his body and prepares his mind. Conceptually, in approaching the "inner Stupa",¹⁵ he circumambulates about the central focus, demarcating a *temenos*, and in the preparatory stages ascends the four steps comprising the base, which represents the fundamental part, progressing inwards and upwards towards the contemplative stage. This stage is represented by the cupola or *anda*, which is the most concentrated centered part of the structure, and which represents the essential psychic conditions necessary for the realization of enlightenment. Through concentration and contemplation, he centers his consciousness. Through the inhibition of the modifications of the mind, he enters into *samadhi*. In this process the stupa provides a contemplative object and a means of orientation that enables him to attain *samadhi*-with-object, and to further transcend that into *samadhi*-without-object. Here the pilgrim attains the center, which is also the portal to the higher centers of consciousness, which are depicted as superior nodes on the vertical axis. Having successfully reached that center, he is in effect established at the summit of the sacrificial fire altar of the *harmika*, above the play of duality, of heaven and earth.



Figure 3 : The Hindu-Buddhist pneuma-physiology

He sacrifices his selfish desires - a "dis-membering here for a re-membering there" - on the fire-altar set at the base of the World-Tree.¹⁶ He then proceeds in the realization phase of enlightenment through vertical ascension and inward movement through the various *bhumis* until, in unification of the lunar *Ida* and solar *Pingala* psychic currents in the *Susumna*, he attains the final realization of enlightenment in the crown-center (*Sahasrara*) (see Fig. 3 above).

From this enlightened state, consciousness may then move downwards and outwards towards phenomenal reality, in the process of imagination and realization of the design. This corresponds with the emanation of the descending series of *bhumis* and more general parts of the stupa. In this process, the architect ritually reenacts the cosmogony; and thereby structures a sacred place within his consciousness in accord with the spatial and temporal cosmogenesis implicit in the stupa. The center forms; the *temenos* is established which excludes distracting influence. The vertical axis provides the means of connection between higher and lower states of consciousness. Space is quartered and stabilized. The network of lines of the mandala is laid down to organize and "restrain" the field of consciousness. Within that orderly cosmos, the imaging of the work of sacred architecture can proceed, in accord with the principal metaphysic schema implicit in the structure of the stupa. This process continues until it reaches the outermost and lowermost plane of Earth, with the materialization of the work in the very matter of the Cosmos.

In this process, meditation not only clarifies the mundane consciousness, enhancing visualization capabilities and so forth. More importantly, it facilitates metaphysical realization and expression. The stupa thus provides a means of meditation and integration of physical and metaphysical domains.



Figure 4 : The Chorten in the Landscape - Padum, Zaskar/Ladakh, courtesy Project Himalaya

CONCLUSION:

THE ROLE OF THE STUPA IN THE MEDITATIVE DESIGN AND REALIZATION OF SACRED ARCHITECTURE

The Stupa provides an excellent exemplar for the meditative realization of sacred architecture. In so far as it is metaphysically valid, it provides a contemplative schema that can be adapted to the needs of the present, where we in the West are faced with the lack of a vital Tradition. That schema can be spatially transformed in a way which retains its essential characteristics, but which is more suited to the present-day.¹⁷ This reformed schema may then be concretized in modern works of sacred architecture. It suggests a way in which mundane objects may be realized as embodiments of supra-mundane realities.

The stupa indicates the process by which a metaphysical enrichment of modern architecture may be achieved. In this process meditation plays a critical role, both as contemplative activity, and as creative procedure. In becoming one with the Stupa, the architect or artisan realizes, albeit imperfectly (i.e. in accord with his level of realization and understanding), his or her Buddha nature. In that process, his work becomes charged with spiritual influence, which is thereby made available to the devout worshipper.

This provides an illustration of a way in which a return to Traditional principles, through renewing an awareness of the multiple levels of being, might thereby contribute to healing a ravaged planet and disoriented humanity.



Figure 5 : Zanskari chorten, © Pierre Arrigo 1992



Figure 6 : *The Chorten in the Landscape - Zanskar/Ladakh, courtesy Don Gurewitz Photography*

- 1 Tradition in this paper is used in the specific sense of referring to those cultures where a sense of the Sacred is paramount. These are usually taken to include traditional Hindu, Buddhist, Moslem, Christian (at least up until the time of the late Middle Ages), and indigenous societies in general.
- 2 Or perhaps opaque rather than devoid; the fault lies firstly in our comprehension, and then in our perception.
- 3 For analyses of the spiritual crisis of the twentieth century see:
Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature - The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. Unwin, London, 1976; and René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*. Luzac and Company Ltd., London, 1975.
- 4 See Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Studies on SouthEast Asia, SouthEast Asia Program, Cornell University, New York, 1975, p.1.
- 5 See Marco Pallis, "Is There Room for "Grace" in Buddhism?", *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*. Ed. Jacob Needleman, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1974, p.274.
- 6 *Guru*: Initiatory Master;
Rimpoche: one who has been recognized as the reincarnation of a lama.
- 7 Eliade observes that the preliminaries of Buddhist asceticism and meditation are similar to those recommended by the Yoga-Sutras and other classic texts.
Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Bollingen Series LVI, Princeton University Press, 1969, p.167.
- 8 I.K. Taimni, *The Science of Yoga: the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali*. A Quest Book, Wheaton, Illinois, 1961. Patanjali, Yoga-Sutra III.1.
- 9 Ibid, Patanjali, Yoga-Sutra III.2.
- 10 Ibid, Patanjali, Yoga-Sutra III.3.
- 11 Ibid, Patanjali, Yoga-Sutra III.4.
- 12 This is *Samadhi* with *Prajna* - *Prajna* stands for the higher consciousness working through the mind in all its stages. *Asamprajnata Samadhi* is "not the *Samadhi* with *Prajna*". Ibid, p.34.
- 13 Ibid, p.35.
- 14 Represented in the stupa by the culminating flaming drop, the *akasa* or Tibetan *nam-mkhah*. The hemisphere also preserves this symbolism of the amlaka of the Hindu *Sikhara*. (See Lama Govinda, *Psycho-cosmic symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa*. Dharma Publishing, Berkeley, 1976, Figure 12, p.42).
- 15 "...Nagarjuna's entry into the stupa is an exemplar of esoteric practices in which the *sadhaka* concentrates his mind upon a symbol (in this case a stupa) and unifies himself with it so that there is an immediate realization of the essential meaning of the symbol: the metaphysical referent of the symbol is directly grasped and incorporated within oneself." Snodgrass, op. cit., p.376.
- 16 The *harmika* and its superstructure evolved from a square laid out around a Bodhi Tree or a Parasol and bounded by a fence or an hypaethral pavilion. The *harmika* is a "high altar" derived from the Vedic fire altar, set under the Village Tree representing the Tree of Life. See Snodgrass, op. cit., p.247 *et passim*.
- 17 "Traditional cultures develop by the application of principles to conditions; the principles, indeed, are unchangeable and universal, but just as nothing can be known except in the mode of the knower, so nothing valid can be accomplished socially without taking into account the character of those concerned and the particular circumstances of the period in which they live." A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge", *The Bugbear of Literacy*. Perennial Books, Middlesex, 1979, p.77.