



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the Gay men's community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of Gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Dear Dharma Daddy:

I'm Stumped by Stupas

Dear Dharma Daddy:

At the GBF Retreat in March at the Vajrapani Institute we had a ceremony around the stupa, a large and prominent structure near the main entrance. What is a stupa and why is it so important?

—Gary Wills, San Francisco

Dear Gary:

A *stupa*, which Tibetans call a *chorten* (pronounced CHER-ten), began as a burial mound and has developed into a symbolic representation of the presence of the Buddha.

After Buddha Shakyamuni died—or, more precisely, passed into final nirvana—his body was, according to the custom of the Indian Subcontinent, cremated. It is said that the body of a holy person does not burn completely to ashes, but leaves behind pieces of bone and small crystalline objects known as *sharira* (literally, “body”) which are worshiped as relics. These relics are regarded as a powerful focus for meditation on the personality of the departed. The Buddha is said to have left the relics out of compassion for those who would otherwise be quite inconsolable at the thought that he had left them. According to tradition, Buddha Shakyamuni's relics were distributed between eight kings who enshrined them in eight earthen burial mounds similar in purpose to the Anglo-Saxon barrows, but hemispherical in shape. A good example of the early, hemispherical, stupa form is found at Sanchi, near Bhopal, in northern India. Today, there are many thousands of objects said to be relics of Shakyamuni enshrined in stupas all

GBF Committees

We always want and need interested participants, so please, JOIN IN! Call the contact person on the committee, or talk to him (or anyone on that committee) at a GBF sitting or event. This is a great practice opportunity!

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over the world. The best known *sharira* of Shakyamuni is a tooth, venerated in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka. A small stupa on the roof of the headquarters of the Buddhist Churches of America (a major Japanese Pure Land Buddhist lineage) in San Francisco contains what is reputed to be a crystalline *sharira* of Shakyamuni.

Over time, the stupa changed both its shape and its function. The hemispherical mound shrank in size while its base

hemispherical mound survives merely as an ornamental ball on top of the finial. In Inner Asian Buddhism (Tibet, Mongolia, and the Himalayan Kingdoms) the stupa has developed an elaborate cosmic symbolism of the four elements. A form similar to the Inner Asian is also found in Japanese cemeteries as a memorial, with a function similar to that of a western headstone.

The function of the stupa also changed over time, coming to be regarded less as a burial

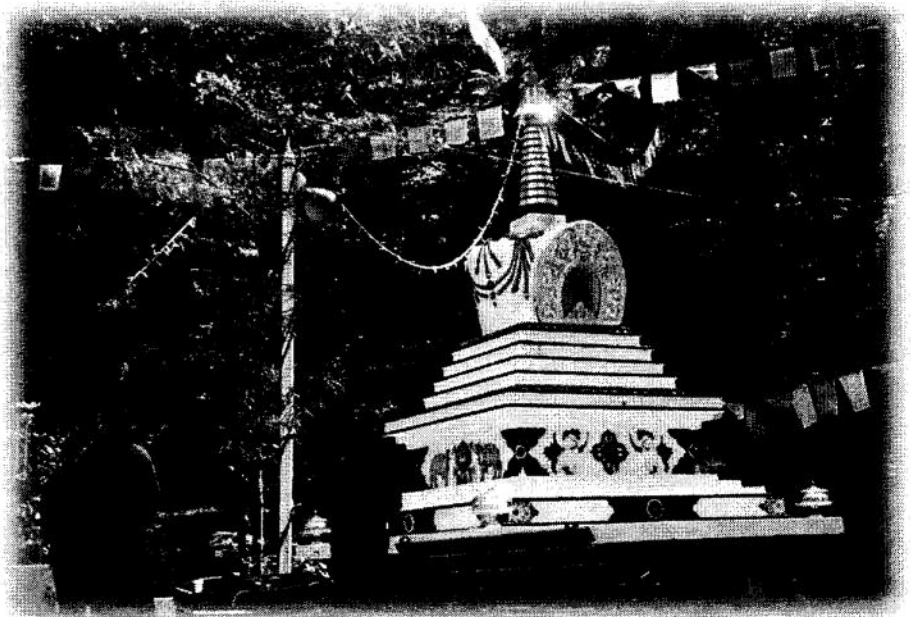


Photo: Clint Seiter

expanded. In Burma (Myanmar) the hemisphere elongated into the slender spire of the form known as *dagopa*. The East Asian stupa, called in English a pagoda, is a temple-like structure of three or five stories in which the original

mound and more as a symbol of the continuing presence of the Buddha. The enshrined relics may be *sharira* of any exalted teacher, and the stupa may also contain other offerings such as gems, precious stones, and portions of scriptural texts.

Building a stupa is regarded as a very meritorious project. Lama Thubten Zopa, Rinpoche, one of the founders of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, of which the Vajrapani Institute is a member, has said, “The benefits you receive from building a stupa equal the number of atoms of the stupa.” One may also gain merit by worshiping at a stupa by bowing or prostrating in front of it or by venerating it by circumambulating it (always in a clockwise direction, keeping the stupa to one’s right). The stupa at the Vajrapani Institute, those who were at the retreat will have noticed, has a prostration board on one side and is surrounded by a walkway.

Lama Zopa quotes the Guhyasmaja Tantra as follows: “A stupa is a palace where all the Buddhas are abiding. Those beings who don’t have the karma to actually see Buddha need the holy objects of body, speech and mind—statues, scriptures, stupas—as a field for accumulating merit.”

Acquiring merit, and distributing it to assist all beings to gain liberation from suffering, is a major occupation in traditional Buddhism. Why does one need merit, and what is it, really? Well, that’s another question, which Dharma Daddy can answer if you wish (and if you ask nicely).

Further reading: *Psycho-cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa* by Lama Anagarika Govinda (Emeryville CA: Dharma Publishing, 1976; originally published in India (?) c.1935) compresses an enormous amount of information on the stupa, dagopa, and chorten into a hundred pages. It is fairly straightforward and much less obscure and idiosyncratic than many of Govinda’s other books. It does not deal with the pagoda. ▼

Send your questions for Dharma Daddy to GBF, 2215-R Market Street, PMB 456, San Francisco CA 94114, or by e-mail to <tashi5@juno.com>.

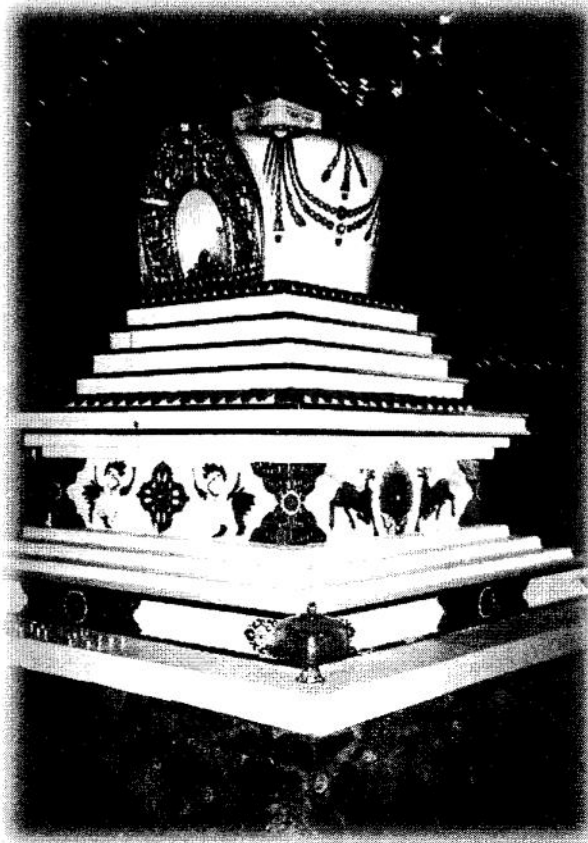


Photo: Clint Seiter

