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, tawing the forms of hemispheres, cones, pyramids and similar plain geometrically 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 (cakravartins), as the Buddha himself mentions in his conversation with Ananda (Digha Nikaya 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 ideolized 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 arts combined the elements of the village sanctuary with the monumental dome of the ancient tumulus (outside), 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 since 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 sapa originally consisted of an almost hemispherical tawgala and an altar-like structure (harana) on its top, surmounted by one or several superimposed konnusita umbrellas. The flattened hemisphere was compared to an egg and therefore called "anda," a term which did not only apply to the shape (which was also compared to a water-bubble) but to its deeper signification as well, namely, as a symbol of latent creative power, while the quadrangular harana on the summit of the canopy 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 harana in the shade of the sacred tree, because the Holy One, whose ashes were enshrined in the altar-like sanctuary of the harana, 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 own '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 konnusita umbrella finally, as an abstract representation of the shade-giving trees in the case the sacred Tree of Life - is one of the chief solar symbols, and in Buddhism that of Enlightenment (sanyah-sambhoga). The importance of this symbol becomes clear from the Pali Scriptures, describing the struggle of the Buddha and Mara, the Evil One, for the place under the Bodhi Tree, the hollow spot in the world, later on known as the Diamond Throne (vajranisa, Tib. dvigie gaden).

It must have been an old custom that the head of the community, with a sort of honour, took possession under the sacred tree in the centre of the settlement where public meetings were to take place on religious and other important occasions. Consequently the umbrellas, 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 tripled, 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 religious-tawgala into the universal conception of the Canopy, from which
later the Tibetan Chorten (chad-rten) 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
railings provided with four gateways (torana) which opened towards
the east, the south, the west and 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 exords 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 pradakshina
pathu for ritual circumambulation in the direction of the sun’s course. The
orientation of the gates equally corresponds to the sun’s course: to
sunsie, 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 enlighten-
ment, the western his "setting in motion the Wheel of the Law" (dharma
cakra pravartana; the proclamation of his doctrine, and the northern his
final liberation (parinirvana).

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 slope of a solid
cone with a corresponding number of horizontal notches, which final-
ly amounted to thirteen. With this transformation the original idea
of the Tree of Life and Enlightenment was visibly restored and steady-
lly 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.

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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 infinites, 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"." (Sutta Pitaka IV, 57, 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 bumha (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 is the base, the body up to the shoulders is the hemisphere, the head in the bumha. This also corresponds to the psycho-physical doctrine of the centre of psychic force (akasa) which are located one above the other in the human body, and through which consciousness develops in its ascending order: from the experiences 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 on the head (lokottara). This cakra is symbolized by a dome-shaped or flower-like structure 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 dagoba (chaur-gath) of Ceylon or the pagoda (a reversal of the word dagoba) in Burma, Thailand and India-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 (dharma) over the whole world and to become a world-ruler (cakravartin). Similarly, the “turning of the Wheel of the Good Law” has become a syncretism for the Buddha’s first proclamation of his doctrine (dharma-chakra-pravartana- sana), 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 thousandfold cakra of his spiritual centre (cakrārtapa-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 crossovers a cairn should be erected to the Tathagata. And whosoever shall there place gelsins or perfumes or paints, or make salutation there, or become in its presence caks in heart, that shall long be to them for a pride and joy.” (Digha Nikaya, VI. 4).

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 ‘men-danda’ but the whole psyche-physical organism was explained in terms of solar and lunar forces, which through five channels, the so-called pāda, 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 "traces"), the Buddha in the 7th 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 practice, 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 recombination 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 transcendent ideas and psychic processes could be expressed by material equivalents, either in terms of the human body (as in cosans, nadis, mitras, asana) or in terms of colors, elements and architectural forms. Thus, the Buddha, when speaking about the four great elements (mahabhutas) 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 play an important role in the Buddhist system of meditation and is one of the four pillars of insight (Sattipattnas).

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*The following passage from Majjhima Nikaya 38 may serve as an example: "What is the 'heating element' (trīyādhatu)?—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."

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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 (vishuddha-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 (japa-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 mChad-rin. 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 bowl-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 maple'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 (gTan-mu) we are told that the "median nerve" (surnuma Tibet; dlu-mo-ri'Tsa) 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. Form 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 symbolic 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 "FOUNDERATION OF TIBETAN MYSTICISM". (Riley, London)
small acuminate 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 hemisphare 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 sakti-architecture, as preserved in the Tibetan Chorten as well as in the Japanese Sōda. In the Chorten the central cupola of the Indian rupa has been reversed into a vase-or pot-shaped vessel ( Tib.: lha-po) which rests on a cubic substructure and is crowned by a tall cone, owing 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' (mahabhūta): the cubical substructure yellow (Earth), the pot-shaped central part white (Water), the conical spike red (Fire), while the fourth element (Air) which should show a green surface, is generally hidden under the homonitic umbrella, a symbol which, especially in its Tibetan form, is closely connected with the concept of Air. Without taking into account its true-origin and its natural relationship to sun, air and sky, it may be mentioned that according to the later Indian and Tibetan tradition homonitic umbrellas were supposed to appear in the sky, when a saint had realized certain magic powers. Between the umbrella and the flaming drop ( Tib.: phag-lha), the respective symbols of Air and Earth, 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 spike. The meaning of this repetition becomes evident if we remember the role of the lunar and solar forces moving through the main channels or nādi of the psycho-physical organism of man. The most important one runs through the spinal column and is called soma (cho-ma-rwa in Tibetan), while ida ( Tib.: rgyang-ma-rwa) and pingala ( Tib.: re-ma-rwa) 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 red-coloured pingala from the right (or controlling the right side). Ida is the conductor of the lunar or 'moon-like' (candamārūpa) 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-teluric cults are centred. Pingala is the vehicle of solar forces (suwarda-unwarda), 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 (prajña 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 sushumna, 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 (sambodhi). In the spherical and conical parts of the Choken 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 (prajña) and compassion (karuna), from the union of which the dazzling Same-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 (bijā), the creative germ or spiritual potentiality, inherent in every sentient being as the potential consciousness of enlightenment (sadbhāvā; Tib.: bya bzhi chab-gnam). The unfolding of this latent principle is the aim of the spiritual path, which is achieved when all our psychic faculties are 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 flames of enlightenment, the crowning symbol of the most universal type of the Tibetan Choken.