

What are Stupas?

Stupas are objects which represent the Enlightened Mind of the Buddha. Just as statues represent Shakyamuni Buddha's body and Dharma texts represent his holy speech, stupas represent his Awakened Mind. Unlike statues and books, stupas represent an intangible essence, and, indeed, stupas themselves are not always visible objects. For example, according to Tulku Sang-ngag Rinpoche, an underground crystal stupa resides under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, the result of a powerful siddhi's meditative absorption there. Rinpoche says, "This underground stupa, this spontaneously present representation of enlightened mind, adorned by the bodhi tree growing on the surface of the earth, provides a unique support for that site, such that all one thousand buddhas who will appear during this age will attain enlightenment at Bodh Gaya."

The stupa is an ancient, spiritually potent symbol of Enlightened Mind, and some early accounts of Buddha's previous incarnations relate that Buddha originally set on the path to liberation while encountering a stupa. According to Rinpoche, "One meaning of 'stupa' is that it is a self-arising, spontaneously occurring phenomenon." In other words, the entire universe can be seen as an enormous stupa. Likewise, each being's interdependent aggregates work together to create a relative self, a microcosmic stupa which operates within the greater stupa of the universe.

The construction of an architectural stupa is very precise: "He [Buddha] said that whether the stupa was as large as Mount Meru or as small as a fingernail, what was important for rendering it a sacred representation of enlightened mind was the proportions." The lower sections of the stupa represent the desire realm; the middle, circular section represents the form realm; and the topmost section with the ornamental spire represents the formless realm. The central pole of the stupa represents dharmadhatu, unconditioned phenomena, the root of Dharma.

The benefits of creating stupas are innumerable: One story tells of a Brahmin named Sergyi Dawa, who averted terminal illness, death, and rebirth in lower realms by building stupas and engaging in other merit-building activities on the advice of the Buddha. Stupas are powerful purifiers, and engaging in the generosity of sponsoring a stupa with the Bodhicitta motivation can even become the cause of Enlightenment itself. According to Tulku Sang-ngag Rinpoche, "If one participates in a stupa's construction and ritual activities, or honors the completed stupa with an altruistic resolve to benefit all beings, then the blessings are such that the Buddha himself could not describe them."

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