

Stupas, Mindfulness and the Futuristic City

The year 2026 marks the 400th anniversary of the Druk Zhung, the unified Bhutanese state, declared in 1626. In the Wood-Ox year, 1626, a magnificent 40-year-old lama ended a three-year retreat (1623-1625/26). John Ardussi (2004) has reconstructed this from Tibetan and Bhutanese sources better than anyone. He dates Bhutan's unification, at least the core of western Bhutan, to this year. The exact year of Zhabdrung's seal, with its 16 'Is', is still debated. But he was already sealing edicts with it in the west, which meant Druk Zhung was operational.

Soon after, he began the construction of the Simtokha fortress to control traffic between Paro, Punakha and Wangdue. It was completed in 1629. That His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck is raising 108 stupas in 24 hours in this 400th anniversary year heralds the rejuvenation of the nation. Where did the stupa begin? Several scholars trace the stupa to Vedic burial mounds, tumuli, built to ward off the spirits of the dead (Lori J. Cayton 1996). These predate Buddhism. The idea behind the burial mound was simple: lock the spirits in, so they could not harm the living. Over time, the mound's purpose changed. It began to honour the dead instead, holding relics or standing as a memorial. This happened long before the Buddha's own life.

The first Buddhist memorial stupas were built only after the Buddha's parinirvana, though they marked the places he had visited during his life. Eight relic-stupas were also built then, one for each of the eight kingdoms that received a share of his cremated remains, not necessarily at the same eight places that mark the eight deeds of his life. Functionally, the first broad classification of stupas settled on five types, each with many sub-divisions. The eight architecturally differentiated shapes found across the Himalayas, including Bhutan, marking the eight deeds of the Buddha's life, form a sub-division of that broader five-type classification. The stupas' shapes changed as their function and symbolism changed.

This eight-type classification came much later than the



eight relic-stupas described above; the two are often confused, though their origins and purposes differ (Cayton 1996). Cayton works out the architecture of each of the eight stupas from Tibetan sources: Buton, Rongtha Lobzang Damcho Gyamtsho, and above all, Desi Sangye Gyatsho, the multi-faceted regent of the great Fifth Dalai Lama. Cayton explains the symbolism of each of the eight stupas in detail. For readers who want to see drawings of the typical eight stupas, the Mongolian artist and lama G. Purevbat (2005), in his study of suvarga, his term for a stupa, draws each form in detail.

Going back to stupas built after the Buddha's parinirvana, the ascetic Vacchagotta once asked the Buddha: does the Tathagata exist after death, or not, or both, or neither? The Buddha did not choose any of the multiple choice answers (Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 72). None applied. Factually, he passed away at Kushinagar in the Mallas kingdom. The harder question was in what way he could be present in the world, and the question took time to settle. Yet as a memorial, he himself asked Ananda to build a stupa over his remains, at a junction of four roads. After his parinirvana, eight stupas were built in

all, one for each of the eight kingdoms that received a share of his cremated relics. So the story goes. There were no images of the Buddha yet, no statues. Buddhist temples had not yet spread. The bone fragments from his cremation made the parinirvana tangible. The Piprahwa stupa in Kapilavastu held his remains (now held in a museum in Delhi), and such stupas became the primary testimony to his passing. They were possibly built, and later rebuilt, by King Ashoka, who made the stupa a Buddhist symbol through the many he sponsored. A mighty number of 84,000 stupas is attributed to him, but this is a common trope, similar to the 84,000 dharma doors of the Buddha, the 84,000 jinas in Jain mythology and the 84 lakhs of living beings in Hinduism. It is an archetypal number, not an exact count, a metaphorical way of saying something is vast or complete. What is certain is that there were numerous stupas in India, but they were destroyed, plundered and rebuilt over the centuries.

Scholars have proposed a time-shape hypothesis: a stupa's shape tracks its period and its country across Buddhist Asia. Broadly, Cayton finds Chinese, Japanese and Korean stupas became roomed-temple pagodas, hollow rather than filled,

serving the same function. Burmese, Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese stupas are tower-like. Pakistani, Nepali and Afghan stupas resemble the Indian form. Tibetan, Mongolian and Bhutanese stupas resemble each other: their measurements and proportions can be traced back to Tibet, as mentioned above. In these places, the stupa's dome shape changed to a vase shape even though big stupas retained the dome shape as it was easier to ensure the stupa's structural stability through this shape.

In Bhutan, Dumtseg in Paro, dated to 1421 or 1433, is an early, innovative temple built in the shape of a stupa, designed by Thangtong Gyalpo (1385-1464). It was built at a time when ideas flowed freely and sectarian boundaries did not exist.

He even had Atisa Dipamkara painted on the walls of Dumtseg. Manfred Gerner (2007) calls it "Thangtong Gyalpo's first creation of a chorten that includes a representation of the Buddhist system of teaching according to the tantric teachings expounded through pictures for laymen and monks alike". His genius led him to experiment successfully across both material and immaterial domains, including stupa shapes and bridges. A different, neglected stupa of his still stands next to the Paro

Bondhey bridge. In Tibet, the Gyantse Kumbum, completed in 1427, shows the same complexity: a multi-chapel Tashi Gomang temple in the shape of a stupa. With imagination, a stupa need not be restricted to any rigid form such as the typical eight.

Over time, a stupa became an object of worship, not only a memorial as we know in a secular sense. The Buddha's teachings were set down in text only 300 to 400 years after his passing. Later stupas encased these texts and made a stronger claim on his presence. His teachings were privileged over the sangha and his corporeal relics. As Yael Bentor (2003) writes, he "was truly present in his teachings," now inside the stupa.

In Tibet, it was named chorten, an object of offering, since it now represented the Buddha's enlightened mind. Thus, a stupa was not only a monument containing bones. The Mahayanists took it as a relic of the dharmakaya, the Buddha's 'truth body,' a concept no physical relic could capture. In Mahayana exegesis, the stupa is 'seen' as the Buddha's own body, seated in meditation, its axis doubling as the channel of the enlightened mind. Each part of his body maps onto a part of the stupa, a considerable stretch, but it lets the devotees see the Buddha meditating inside it. ▶ Pg 6

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The number 108 carries meaning of its own, though it is not exclusively Buddhist. It comes from Vedic symbolism, to which Buddhism gave new meanings. There are 108 Upanishads. The Derge Kangyur, the Tibetan canon, fills 108 volumes. One Theravada method reaches 108 by multiplying six senses, three feelings, two states and three times: past, present, future. The Lankavatara Sutra frames its whole teaching as an answer to 108 questions.

Raising a stupa inscribes meaning onto landscape, what anthropologists call place-making. So did the mani-dangrims along Bhutan's old mule-tracks, housing Buddhist texts and objects of worship. The same logic applies to the 108 stupas. Carrying texts and substances, they carry the Buddha's presence into the future. A space becomes a place only when it holds meaning and value. That is what these stupas do for the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC): they commemorate land invested with hope, for the flourishing of people and animals. That 108 stupas will be built in 24 hours, on the day of the Buddha's descent from heaven (lhabab duechen), itself creates new meaning: the stuff of an unfolding legend.

His Majesty The King said on 19 June 2023: Gelephu must have longevity—it should grow strong roots, and be balanced between timelessness and relevance. We often build tradition and modernity as opposites: finance versus wellbeing, culture versus production, nature versus urbanisation. Our vision is to harmonise these, through symbiosis, interdependence and sustainability, in a city of kind systems.

The 108 stupas were raised in one day, on 1 November 2026. What might they instantiate, of interdependence and harmony, between the city's structures and its residents' lives? The 108 stupas serve more than one purpose. For a pilgrim, the full circumambulation, a kora, accumulates merit. For a resident, the same path is simply the route to work, repurposed: the commute becomes a devotional walk

and exercise. That is integration in practice.

A long walk along the stupas, properly practiced, is not only symbolic. It works on the physiology first: it quickens the heartbeat, moves muscles and hormones. Antonio Damasio (1999, 2021) names it emotion, though he means something more specific by it: not yet something felt, but the body's own automatic reaction. Feeling comes after, when the brain registers that reaction and becomes conscious of it.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha lays out mindfulness in four factors: the body, feelings, the mind and mental objects. Bhikkhu Anālayo has set this out across his books (2003, 2018, 2019). Feeling carries a tone, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, the instant the body meets the world. One kind of pleasant feeling is ordinary: fed by a good meal or a pleasant sight, it ends when its source ends. The other needs nothing from outside. It is the joy a still mind produces by staying settled, deepening in meditation as attention gathers and stops scattering. A short walk will not produce it. Hundreds of steps of unhurried attention, with breathwork, will. The sutta asks us to notice whichever feeling is present, without being swept into it. Neutral feeling is the hardest to notice and the easiest to miss, and missing it costs equanimity. Finally, the mind should rest, neither reaching for the next stupa nor straying elsewhere. Walked this way, the stupas become the teaching itself, the dharma, done with feet, breath and mind. Imagine the Buddha walking for 45 years across the Gangetic plains, after his enlightenment, to reach everyone! Similarly, we may ask what can the stupas tell about the future.

Stupas sprang up at mountain passes, river crossings and trade arteries around Asia: along the Gandhara route, the Silk Road, the Grand Trunk Road and the Tea-Horse Road. These were trade routes between kingdoms and civilisations. Merchants funded monasteries and stupas along

them, for merit. In return, the monasteries gave travellers lodging, storage and a blessing for safe passage. This was long before travel insurance. If merit and success in an uncertain world were the historical motives, all three (merit, success and uncertainty) have grown, because change keeps accelerating. People in GMC may be busier than their grandparents ever were. Hartmut Rosa (2013) has a name for this: frenetic standstill, accelerating constantly while arriving nowhere. His antidote is resonance: stepping far enough outside that acceleration to feel connected to something, rather than merely seeing it and moving past.

A stupa can interrupt that frenetic condition. Its purpose is to interrupt the traveller's haste, with the mindfulness explained above. Many more such interrupters, temples, are already planned. His Majesty The King will raise an altogether different kind of city and this has prompted wide curiosity. Curiosity centres on the politics, laws and economics of a place that lives administratively and legally on its own. Curiosity arises from the kind of architecture-ecology relationship it can nurture.

Curiosity is about who will come to own, live, work and die in this place that has begun to fascinate so much. The process of the city's creation itself has galvanised the youths, monastics, lay priests, laymen and officials, in short, all. Of special significance is the involvement of the youth as employees and workers, whose journey will shape and will be shaped by the GMC. This is also the enlightened intention of His Majesty.

Mariana Mazzucato's (2018, 2021) institutional economics of the mission-oriented state fits loosely with the King's approach to a GMC with laws of its own. But it should be more radical: accountable to mindfulness and GNH, and perhaps to postcapitalist or post-neoliberal values no mission-oriented state has tried. All eyes are on where it settles, ideologically. Kate Raworth's

(2017) generous, distributive city, its social floor and ecological ceiling in Doughnut Economics, will also be attractive here.

GMC is meant to be, at once, an international gateway, a fintech zone, a data centre, a sports hub, a wellness city, a conferencing venue, and a city of temples and stupas, where AI, robotics, and autonomous and flying vehicles may operate. Its planners know they must temper the profit-only motive of corporatist capitalism. Elsewhere, cities have not resisted that seduction; commercial interests dominate them. Most advanced cities rate their buildings, transport, air quality, cultural amenities and commercial success, but not much else of deeper consequence to the lives of ordinary people. They do not measure the felt quality of urban life. GMC must pioneer that measurement, of a happy city, a mindful one, a flourishing

one and stay true to it. His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness implied a different purpose for government and for the companies working within its framework. On consecrating 108 stupas, may GMC become a truly transformative model.

We now understand the cosmos scientifically. In the past, a stupa's structure was a miniature cosmos: its five tiers stood for the five elements in Vajrayana - earth, water, fire, air and space. Its spire is Mount Meru, the axis of the universe, circled by the sun and moon. It is obviously antiquated and no one should use it as a teaching tool, even for monks.

Note: This article is an extract from an upcoming book.

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