Stupas, Mindfulness and the Futuristic City by Karma Ura, Advisor, CB&GNHS

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400th anniversary year of founding of the nation

2026 marks the 400th anniversary of the Drug Zhung, the unified Bhutanese state, declared in 1626. In the Wood-Ox year, 1626, a 32-year-old lama ended a three-year retreat (1623–1625/26). Ardussi 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 (Ardussi 2004). The exact year of Zhabdrung's seal, with its 16 "I"s, is still debated. But he was already sealing edicts with it in the west, which meant Drug Zhung was operational. Soon after, he began Semtokha fortress, to control traffic between Paro, Punakha, and Wangdi. It was completed in 1629. That HM King Khesar is raising 108 stupas in 24 hours in this 400th anniversary year is highly auspicious.

Origin of Buddhist stupas, and their changing shapes

Where did the stupa begin? Several scholars trace the stupa to Vedic burial mounds, tumuli, built to ward off the spirits of the dead (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 a 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 before the Buddha's parinirvāṇa, to mark the places he had visited during his life. Eight relic-stupas were built after his parinirvana, one in each of the eight kingdoms that received a share of his cremated remains. They were built not necessarily at the same places where stupas were built during his lifetime. Shapes of stupas then was essentially dome made of bricks, like the Ananda stupa in Vaishali. 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 (Cayton 1996). The shapes of stupas changed as their function and symbolism changed. For instances, Tibetanized form has vase shape while earlier Indian ones were dome shaped. But the large chortens in the Himalayas adopted dome shape because for structural stability.

This eight-type classification popular in Tibet and Bhutan came much later than the eight relic-stupas described above; the two are often confused. Their origins and purposes differ (Cayton 1996). Cayton traces the architecture of each of the eight stupas to Tibetan sources such as Buton, Rongtha Lobzang Damcho Gyamtsho, and above all Desi Sangay Gyamtsho, the multi-faceted regent of the great Fifth Dalai Lama. Cayton explains in detail the symbolism of various parts of the eight stupas. For readers who want to see elegant drawings of the typical eight stupas, the

Mongolian artist and lama G. Purevbat, in his study of suvarga, his term for a stupa, draws each form well (Purevbat 2005).

Going back to stupas built after the parinirvāṇa of the Buddha, 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 continue to be present in the world, and the question took time to settle (Strong 2004, Snodgrass 1985). Yet as a memorial, he himself asked Ananda to build a stupa over his remains, at a junction of four roads. After his parinirvāṇa, eight stupas were built in all by the eight kings who received relics of the Buddha. 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 entered into a stupa made the parinirvāṇa tangible (Schopen 1997). For instance, the Piprahwa stupa in Kapilavastu held his remains. Such stupas became the primary testimony to his passing (Srivastava 1996). It seems they were later rebuilt in prolific numbers by Asoka making them into a Buddhist symbol. A mighty number of 84,000 stupas is attributed to him, but this is a common trope, like 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, and a metaphorical way of saying something is vast or complete. What is certain is that there were numerous stupas in India, but they were, over the centuries, plundered and destroyed and their ruins devoured by time, and occasionally rebuilt.

Scholars have proposed a time-shape hypothesis: a stupa's shape tracks its period and its country, across Buddhist Asia (Longhurst 1936, Snodgrass 1985). 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 to Tibetans.

In Bhutan, Dumtse in Paro, dated to 1421 or 1433, is an early, novel temple built in the shape of a stupa, designed by Thangtong Gyalpo (1385–1464) (Aris 1979, Stearns 2007). It was built at a time when ideas flowed freely, and sectarian boundaries did not exist. He even had Atīsa Dipamkara painted on the walls of Dumtse. Gerner (2007) calls it "Thangtong Gyalpo's first creation of a chörten 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 things in both material and immaterial domains, including stupa shapes and bridges. A different stupa of his still stands next to the Paro Bondey 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.

Inscribing meaning into the landscape

Over time a stupa became an object of worship, not only a memorial as we know in a secular sense. 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 Bentor writes, he "was truly present in his teachings," now inside the stupa (Bentor 2003).

In Tibet it was named mchod rten, an object of offering, since it was asserted to represent the Buddha's enlightened mind. Thus, a stupa was not only a monument containing bones. The Mahayanists took it as a relic of the Dharmakāya, the Buddha's "truth body," a concept no physical relic could capture (Bentor 2003).

In Mahayana exegesis, the stupa is projected to be 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, by an abstraction, encouraging the devotees to have double vision of the Buddha meditating and the stupa in the same form.

We now understand the cosmos scientifically, but the stupa has long been read as a miniature cosmos: its five tiers stood for the five elements, earth, water, fire, air, and space, in Vajrayana. Its spire is Mount Meru, the axis of the universe, circled by sun and moon (Huntington 2018, Snodgrass 1985). It is obviously antiquated and should not be a teaching tool, even for monastics.

The number 108 carries meaning of its own, though it is not exclusively Buddhist. It comes from Vedic symbolism, but Buddhism gave its own meanings to it. There are 108 Upanishads (Olivelle 1998). The Derge Kangyur, the most popular of Tibetan canons, 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 (Sutton 1991).

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 (Tuan 1977, Relph 1976). That is what these stupas do for Gaylegphug: they commemorate land invested with hope, for the flourishing of people and animals. That 108 stupas will be completed on the day of the Buddha's descent, itself creates new meaning and an unfolding legend.

HM's emphasis on integration and timelessness

His Majesty the King said on June 19, 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 well-being, culture versus production, nature versus urbanisation. Our vision is to harmonize these, through symbiosis, interdependence, and sustainability, in a city of kind systems."

The 108 stupas is scheduled to complete in 24 hours, on the first of 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, 2018, 2021) calls 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, 2013, 2017, 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 in this manner (Lopez 2013).

What the stupas tell about the future

Stupas sprang up at mountain passes, river crossings, and trade arteries around Asia: along the Gandhāra route, the Silk Road, the Grand Trunk Road, the Tea-Horse Road (Hansen 2012, Liu 1988). 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 or before social security schemes.

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 the 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 creation of the city itself has galvanized the youth, the monastics, the lay priests, the laymen, and the officials. 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 the enlightened intention of His Majesty.

Mazzucato's institutional economics of the mission-oriented state fits loosely with the King's approach to a GMC with laws of its own (Mazzucato 2018, 2021). But it should be more radical: accountable to mindfulness and GNH, and perhaps to post-capitalist or post-neoliberal values no mission-oriented state has tried. All eyes are on where it settles, ideologically. Raworth's generous, distributive city, its social floor and ecological ceiling in Doughnut Economics, will also be attractive here (Raworth 2017).

GMC is meant to be, at once, an international airport, a fintech zone, a data centre, and educational city, a sports hub, a wellness and health city, an education and health zone, 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 corporate 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 is best placed to pioneer that measurement, of a happy city, a mindful one, a flourishing one, and stay true to it. The Fourth King's Gross National Happiness implied a different purpose for government, and for the companies working within its framework. Upon consecration of 108 stupas, may GMC become a truly transformative model.

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