

Significance of Buddhist Stupas in Vajrayana Tradition in Bhutan

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ABSTRACT

In vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan, stūpas are known as Chorten, a means of offering or the sacred spot of worship. It symbolizes the special presence of three bodies of Buddha (*Tib: Ku-sung-thug*), considered the important religious monuments focused on daily worship. The scriptural and structural representation of the Chorten is different from the initial structural design in Buddha's time, with the various structural designs symbolizing the various virtues in vajrayāna tradition. The legendary eight chortens are incredibly built-in Bhutan. It commemorates the eight different Buddha Shakyamuni's life in eight distinctive holy places like Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Varanasi, Shravasti, Shankasa, Rajgir, Vaishali, and Kushinagar in Nepal and India, with slightly different structural designs among them. Apart from the eight commemorative chortens of Buddha, different chorten designs are seen on highways, hilltop, valley, river junctions, crossroads, mountain passes, bridges, and considered inauspicious locations symbolizing each differently in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan. Thus, in this context, this paper primarily focuses on the structural symbolism of Buddhist eight chortens and other multiple Bhutanese style chortens, symbolically kept sacred and valued instinctively within the vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan. The paper tries to understand the evolution of Buddhist stūpas and its revolution of distinctive foundational layouts and structural design to vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan. This study also explores the symbolism of the distinctive shapes incorporated in the chortens. It aims to clarify the symbolism and sacred foundational construction layout of multiple Bhutanese style chortens and the merits of building and circumambulate the chortens in the vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan.

Keywords: Vajrayāna, Chortens, Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Varanasi, Shravasti, Shankasa, Rajgir, Vaishali, Kushinagar, Archeology, Eight great Buddhist Stupas.

Introduction

There are unique, religious, and primary ideas of the stūpas in the past around the globe. In vajrayāna tradition, the state religion of Bhutan expresses that the scriptural and structural portrayal of every stupa has the difference in shape and its meaning. Besides other Bhutanese stūpas, there are eight incredible Buddhist stupas in Bhutan, in line with the eight sacred sites related to the life of Lord Buddha in various destinations around India and Nepal. Hence, the eight remarkable stupas are auspicious, and every eight incredible stupas have their portrayal identifying with Buddha's life in vajrayāna tradition.

The eight great stūpas go about as a focal respect place for Bhutanese social orders. In vajrayāna tradition, the stūpa represents Buddha's physical body, speech, and dharmakaya mind. The stūpa illustrates a complex range of iconographic marks relating to the occasion that took over by the Buddha Shakyamuni in eight distinctive holy places of Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Varanasi, Shravasti, Shankasa, Rajgir, Vaishali, and Kushinagar in India. In vajrayāna tradition, each of its eight holy places represents the specific features of the path towards enlightenment. Thus it assumes a virtual part in Bhutanese social orders for these eight sacred spots of the Buddha.

Subsequently, there are more Bhutanese designs stūpas in Bhutan that individuals love and respect behind these eight stupas. The eight stūpas and other various kinds of stūpas in Bhutanese social orders have arisen, encouraging a massive part in building up the Bhutanese community otherworldly and social prosperity. Generally, it expressed that the eight incredible stūpas began

after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa at Kushinagar, India. The relics and remains are distributed into eight distinct parts in India to construct the lord Buddha's honoring stūpas. The stūpas are the admirer place for conventional individuals, not for the priest and nuns. In any case, in Bhutanese settings, the Buddhist landmarks express the idea of Buddha's mind, indicating the important occasions in Buddha's day-to-day existence. The structure shows the kindness and the perfection of all-inclusive morals.

The stūpas are said to work in this better place, identifying with the huge occasions in Buddha's life in India. In vajrayāna tradition, stūpas are the Buddhist arts that symbolize the architectural design of numerous diverse levels. The distinctive foundational layout of these great eight stūpas relating to every eight unique occasions in the life of Lord Buddha. A Buddhist stūpa integrates with different proportioned outlines parallel to the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space, of which all atoms of the world are tranquil within it. Furthermore, the vajrayāna tradition's stūpa represent likely to the Buddha's position in a meditative seated posture and that every structure design of the stūpas in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan is unique, corresponding to the spiritual path towards the enlightenment. Thus there are numerous diverse styles of stūpas in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan other than the eight architectural structures of stūpas relating to the events of the Lord Buddha.

The eight classifications of chortens in vajrayāna tradition are worked to remember the occasions in the life of enlightened Buddha or other venerable pupils. The great eight chorten itself emerged upon the Buddha's body, speech, mind, wisdom, and deeds. Before his parinirvana, Buddha himself had trained Ānanda¹ to fabricate the thirteen-venture chorten with his relics. When a significant educator bites the dust, a few chortens are built to revere the incinerated remains. That incorporates a bigger chorten in the open, just as more modest repositories containing a portion of the incinerated remains².

The Tibetan design stūpa revealed in Tibet when the dharma king Songtsen Gyempo first revealed Buddhism in Tibet, which the stūpa (Tib: Chorten)³ revealed in Tibet. Further, the chorten development occurred under the rule of the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen⁴ in the eighth century, who later officially brought vajrayāna Buddhism to Tibet from India. Guru Rinpoche⁵ was the first hereditary practiced of the Tibetan Buddhism of Nyingma School⁶. In Tibet, the first Buddhist monastery was Samye monastery architecture and administered by Guru Rinpoche himself and completed in 799CE. The mandala layout is like a monastery with the main temple in the center surrounded by four different colors Chorten in four directions (see figure)

¹ Ānanda (Tib: Kuengayo) he is the cousin of Buddha, who later became the attendant of Buddha. Ānanda remembers all sutta teaching of the Buddha and reited in first council.

² Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of Stupa.*, second (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992)

³ Refer to the stupa which is in Tibetan Buddhism. It is the type of offering and the mind representation of the lord Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism

⁴ Tibetan king who ruled Tibet from 755 to 797 CE

⁵ Padmasambhava is the legendary Indian Buddhist who introduced tantric Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century, who built the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet.

⁶ Le Huu Phuoc, *Buddhist Architecture* (Grafikol, 2012).



Fig. 1 Samye monastery in Tibet (Courtesy: Google Image)

The main temple is encircled by a boundary wall crowned by four small chortens at four cardinal directions. These represent a protective territory from the different evil spirits¹ and that architectural design of the chorten like a mandala revealed in Tibet. There are various types of chortens going from the littlest to a few height meters . Their structure or the structure varies as much among the eight kinds of chortens . In vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan , the chronicled start of the great eight chortens are related to the important eight occasions of the Buddha. Built according to the epics episode of Buddha's beginning from his introduction to the world, birth, enlightenment, the first sermon of teaching, from the descending heavenly realm, performing miracles, compromises sangha and prolongation of his life and demise². The chorten is an immediate change of stupa from India. The components of every structure of the chorten in vajrayāna Buddhism have different symbolic structure s with various characteristics. Each proportion of the chortens symbolized the other theological aspects of the vajrayāna tradition . There are varieties of chortens in Bhutan with different fundamental designs and symbolism. The base of the chortens are in the square steps arisen a throne, known as "Lion Throne". (Tib: Sang Tre) Above this, another square arose steps with the hemisphere dome shape (Tib: Bumpa) and then a square reliquary chamber; harmika, then to thirteen wheel spire. The umbrella of a parasol,

¹ Wah Sang Wong, "Stupa, Pagoda and Chorten – Origin and Meaning of Buddhist Architecture", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: ARC2014-1094., 2014, 1–15.

² Culture. The Division for Cultural Properties. Department of Culture, *Menjong Druk Gi Dzong Zhi Dang Lhakhang Gyendhy, Taen Ngychey Lamsel Layshay*.

hemispherical moon top with the sun enacting the dissolving frame of a dome peak jewel with each of their characteristics.

The Architecture of Chorten

The symbolism of Chorten in vajrayāna Buddhism:

The Chorten is the most prominent engineering portrayal structure in Bhutan, something like a spiritual generator. The word stūpa is a Sanskrit word, alluded to the store up, heap, hill, and raise over the ground level, but it named as Chorten in Tibetan exists on so many levels, which are not perceived by our external five senses. The outer portion of the chorten is the only form of a symbol that acts as natural energy for the chortens. In Buddhist nations, the chorten engineering is one of the most seasoned Buddhist landmarks to safeguard the Buddha's remaining parts and relics after the Mahaparinirvana. Later the various engineering plans are worked for the methods for picking up high-minded merits¹. According to the vinaya ksudra vastu the chorten are to be constructed accordingly to their characteristics and structural design as the following state:

“A stupa of the Tathāgata should be complete in all its aspects, the Pratyekabuddhas should have the rain cover left out; the arhats should have four parasols; the Non-Returner's three; the Once-Returner's two; the Stream-Enterer's one; for virtuous ordinary people, a bald stūpa should be made².”

The Chorten is an immediate change from the Indian stūpa in vajrayāna tradition. It represents the attainment of three kayas of the Buddha or demonstrates the mind of Buddha, for path to enlightenment. The chorten as a whole was conceived as a dharmakaya in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan. Each part of the chorten is regarded as the component of the dharma teaching. Every part of the chorten constitutes the dharma components that compromise the path to enlightenment, which unites absolute and relative truth. In its absolute reality, the chorten represents the indestructible, the unconditioned, which is beyond concepts of the Buddha's mind³. The chorten structure begins from the exclusion of the foundation base and throne. The chorten structure starts from the base (Tib: Mang) located above the throne, upholding different parts. The base is with four steps as a foundational layout with the upward single steps throne, the Buddha's seated position symbolizing the ten righteous actions (Tib: Gaywa Chu). The body is the vase (Tib: Bumpa) and heads to the harmika pictured with two eyes painted supporting the yasti, thirteen circular disks, the parasol, moon, and sun with the jewel top⁴. The symbolization of the chorten can be classified into two parts in vajrayāna tradition as the lower part below thirteen wheels (Tib: chuksum khorlo) correlates to the foundation of illuminating the bodhisattva path. The upper part signifies the outcome measure of enlightenment as the thirteen wheels (Tib: Khorla) represent the ten powers and three ways to mindfulness, while parasol (Tib: dug) symbolizes great compassion⁵.

In vajrayāna, tradition chortens honor Buddha in the traditional Buddhist three-fold classification of the body (Tib:Ku), speech (Tib:Sung), mind (Tib:Thug), wisdom (Tib:Yonten), and deeds (Tib:Thinley). Chorten vowed to perform numerous meritorious actions for the good of all living

¹ O. and Longhurst, “The Story of the Stūpa.”

² Vinaya ksudraka vastu, is the rules on monastic funerals and relics.

³ Fogelin, “Early Buddhist Stupas and the Origin of Mahayana Buddhism.”

⁴ Lama, *Dharmakaya Stupa*.

⁵ Atisha Dipenkara, inspired Vajrayana Buddhism in Asia

beings. All kinds of statues as the body¹. The sacred texts as speech and chortens as the mind. Chortens are embodiment insight to enlightenment², with three foundational principles, practices to the path and the result. The chorten shows every one of the three; the base and throne are the moral establishments of all practices. The practice path is the steps, vase, and harmika of the chorten. The apex of the chorten represents all the results of the practice and enlightened mind³.

The chorten in vajrayāna tradition is placed with a square base with four directions representing east, west, north, and south. chorten represents the three kayas' attainment: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya of the Buddha.

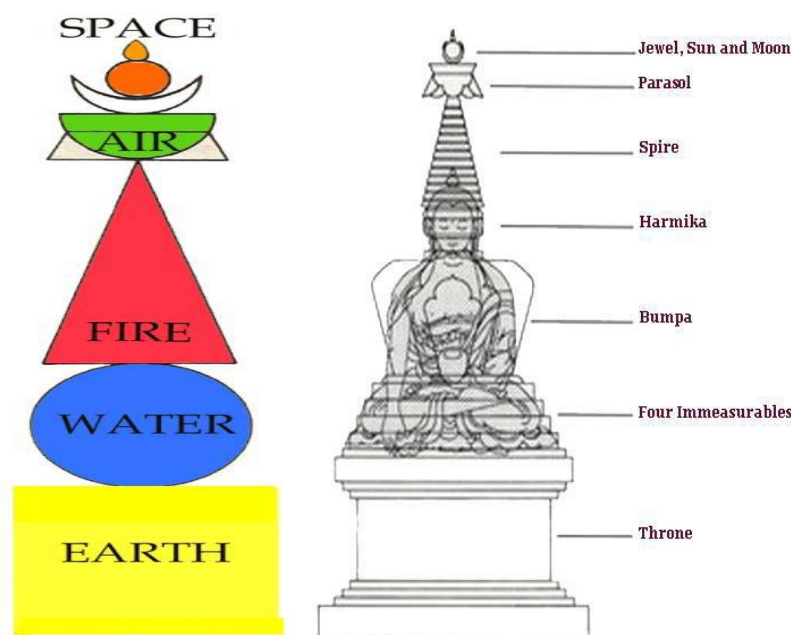


Fig. 2 Five element colour and Buddha in seated posture representations in Vajrayana stupa
(Courtesy: google image)

The three kayas relate to the true nature: the three nature aspects of the right mind in contemporary reality. Nirmanakaya, which is related to the external phenomenal that we perceive around us, nature, and the light or energy, is connected to sambhogakaya. The truth of inherent nature is the dharmakaya. Chortens itself is the symbol of the parinirvana Buddha and the symbol of the dharma in vajrayāna tradition. Thus, the external structural proportion of chorten symbolizes the Buddha in a seated meditation posture. The five elements and their wisdom symbolize the inner proportion of the chorten, and that chorten itself denotes the mandala or the entire universe⁴.

¹ Culture. Division for Cultural Properties. Department of Culture, *Menjong Druk Gi Dzong Zhi Dang Lhakhang Gyendhy, Taen Ngychey Lamsel Layshay*.

² Melam, *Tibetan Chorten*.

³ Wangchuk, *Foundations of Bhutan History: A Concise Guide*.

⁴ Kelzang Lhendup, *"Tibetan Stupa,"* (Department of Education, A central Tibetan Administration of H.H. the Dalai Lama. Gangchen Kyishong, Dharamsala 176215, 2007).

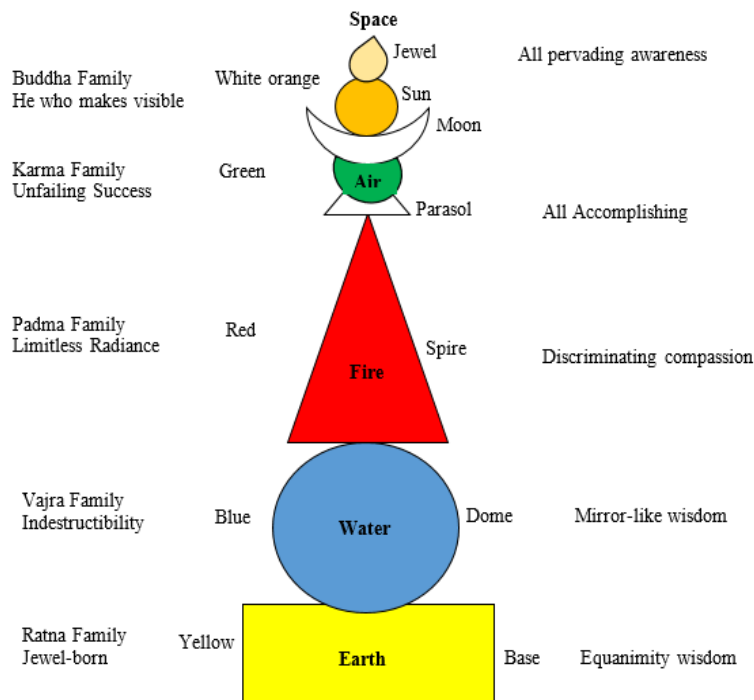


Fig. 3 Five elements, colors, and wisdom related to stupa

The chorten tradition is a significant architectural structure in the vajrayāna tradition. The base is the seat of the Buddha. (Tib: Sing tri) In the vase bumpa, the container is loaded up with treasures, mantras, jewels, clothes, manuscripts, agricultural tools, grains, statues, and butter lamps. Then cover-up by the harmika with the two eye paintings on it. On top of the harmika the thirteen rings of round shapes top up with the parasol as an umbrella. The highest image of the moon and sun with the jewel top express the heart and mind. It also implies five components of earth, water, fire, air, and an intelligence base of a square shape is the earth component. The arch shape represents a water component. The cone, like a shape, symbolizes the fire. The parasol and moon are air components, and the sun represents insight¹. It can also be judged through the above Fig 2 and 3.

The chorten can have numerous degrees of implications, yet they, for the most part, are the compact perception of the way of thinking. In the vajrayāna tradition, our ordinary acceptance and wishes are to have an unaffected life of things to be done with the help of four components of earth, water, fire, and wind. The fifth component is considered to be emptiness. Still, it doesn't mean for the nothingness, rather the undetermined potential to become any composite of the other four components of the element². The square shape base of the chorten represents the element of earth and the bumpa (hemispherical arch) for the water element. The upper part of the chorten

¹ Lama, *Dharmakaya Stupa*.

² Yael Bentor, "On the Indian Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dhāraṇīs in Stūpas and Images On the Indian Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dharanis in Stupas and Images," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 2 (1995): 248, <https://doi.org/10.2307/604668>.

apex cone-like shape is the fire element, and the wind element is the umbrella shape of a parasol. The uppermost top of the chorten is jeweled with the sun, and the moon symbolized the emptiness. The square base earth element with yellow color symbolizes the Ratna family of jewel-born with equanimity wisdom. The dome-shaped blue color of the water element is the mirror-like wisdom of the indestructible Vajra family. The fire element of the red spire shape discriminates compassion with the limitless radiance of the Padma family. The green color parasol of the air element of all accomplishing wisdom is the karma family of unfailing success¹. The sun, moon, and the white orange jewel symbolize the space element with the Buddha family, which makes visible to all-pervading awareness wisdom² (see figure 3).

Thus, the different components of the chorten in vajrayāna tradition indicate the five Buddha families, five colors, five pearls of wisdom, and five elements. The chorten compared to different dharma implications in vajrayāna tradition : four mindfulness, mindfulness to the body, feelings, mind, and things. Four right actions such as abstaining from killing, stealing, wrong speech, and sexual misconduct³. Four bases of miraculous powers like intention, diligence, attention, and discernment practice at the greater level of the path to accumulation which provide the foundation for attaining six perceptions, five moral strengths, and seven states of enlightenment⁴.

Thus each section of the chorten in vajrayāna tradition symbolizes relatively Buddha and foundational dharma. The top of the chorten jewel symbolized enlightenment and the sun as wisdom. The heart of awakening bodhichitta is the moon and the parasol as compassion. The thirteen rings of the spire are the path ten bhumis or the level path of the Mahayana and three rings as the highest stage path of the vajrayāna. The harmika is the representation of the Buddha's eyes, symbolizing the eightfold path. The vase (Tib:Bumpa) represents the upper main body part of the Buddha, symbolizing the enlightenment part of seven elements. The four steps below the bumpa are the Buddha's legs in seated cross posture, a symbol of four immeasurable like; equanimity (Tib: Tangnyom) love (Tib: Jampa) compassion (Tib:Nyingye), and joy (Tib: Gawa). The last part of the chorten, the seat, and the three phases at the base represent three refuges of Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

In other ways, chortens represent the ways of enlightenment that comprise a successive cycle. The seat and base are the fundamental starting help for the chorten. It indicates accumulation to plan one to be appropriate for a definitive acknowledgment of the dharmakaya. Thus a wide scope of information and intensive perspective on the dharma must be educated, and fundamental practices are taken to acknowledge the view⁵. The four phases on the chorten are advancing stages of the discriminative perception to the non-determined mindfulness. The side of the four addresses the confined mind by standard contemplations to fall on four philosophical limits of presence, non-presence, presence, and non-presence, just as not one or the other presence non-presence. The bumpa represent the basic practically non-separating appearance, the method of understanding, which is the prompt perspective on the reality of the dharma through non-conceptual mindfulness alongside discriminative awareness⁶.

¹ David Weldon Robert A.F Thurman, "Sacred Symbols the Ritual Art of Tibet.pdf" (New York: Tara Theune, Hong Kong, 1999).

² Wangchuk, *Foundations of Bhutan History : A Concise Guide*.

³ Tulku Sang ngag Rinpoche, "Snow Lion," *Snow Lion*, November 4, 1995, <https://doi.org/ISSN 1059-3691>.

⁴ Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa, The Symbolism of the Stupa*, First (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass publisher Pvt. Ltd. Delhi, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501718960>.

⁵ Second International Conference, "Vajrayana Buddhism in the Modern World," no. March (2018): 28–30.

⁶ Robert A.F Thurman, "Sacred Symbols the Ritual Art of Tibet.pdf."

The thirteen ring circles express the way of cultivation, practices of thirteen stages, and affirmation to the mind of Buddha. The ten stages of bodhisattvas and three correspondent stages emphasize the dharmakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the nirmanakaya. The top most of the chorten is the sun, moon, and jewel tip, representing duality and the means of fully learned and no further learning¹.

There is no obstacle for the Buddhahood when one finally transcends all those obscurations. The jewel tip on the chorten represents the state of transcending a Vajra like Samadhi, a fundamental condition of Buddhahood. In vajrayāna tradition, chorten additionally implies the field of offering and a Buddha-mind. The chorten gives way to go from the beginning stage to the incomprehensible goal. In Bhutan, chorten has diverse foundational layouts as an exuberant love place for Bhutanese social orders. The chorten investigates as a Buddhist landmark, representing the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha². In the vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan, The chortens are the special Buddhist compositional landmarks, which express the Buddha's actual presence and represent the Buddhist universe, including the four components of earth, water, fire, wind. On one side of the chortens in the middle piece of arch shape sculptures like Dhyani Buddha and the illuminated god, the master of three families, Avalokiteśvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani is put, which represent the body, speech and mind of the past, present, and future Buddha. In Bhutan, the chorten in vajrayāna tradition consistently holds numerous significant things, i.e., sutra contents, Buddha statues, tsa-tsas³, hair, fingernails, relics, and incineration remains of holy people cherished in them alongside gems, spices, and other essential items⁴.

In Bhutan, chorten, models are found in various unique categories predominantly worked to one or the other to pin down our malicious spirits. There are many chortens in Bhutan, worked for multiple purposes, similar to recollections of extraordinary individuals, to prevent distasteful spirits, to forestall avalanches and mishaps, where individuals thought demonic spirits cause them. It is implicit risky spots like passes and streets. The development strategies of the chortens in Bhutan include many, where the site determination depends on the astrologer's recommendation and an excellent day to begin the development works⁵. For the beginning of development, customs are performed to the earth divinities to eliminate all impediments and favor the site for effective fulfillment⁶.

The cedar post (Tib:Sokshing) is generally bent from the sandalwood set on establishing the chorten with the openings at the top and the base to be put inside holy relics and writings. Other holy relics are put inside and constructed chorten on it. Chortens in Bhutan are the underlying model symbolizing the Lord Buddha image, all the more precisely of his illuminated mind. The hill itself speaks to the type of situated Buddha, contemplation, and endeavoring towards

¹ David P Jackson and Franz-karl Ehrhard, "Contributions to Tibetan Studies," *The Illuminating Mirror* 12 (2015): 52.

² Bhutan National Museum Paro, *Druk Ge Cha Ring Dang Ngan Rab Ge Lo Jue Zhebtshel Gorim Dangpa.*, 3rd ed. (National Museum Paro, Bhutan, 2017).

³ TSA-TSA is the form of small stupa in cylindrical cone shape made up of clay, which is about 3 to 4 inches tall. It is found in caves, under rocks and those spiritual sites mostly painted in white but some can be in golden and red color.

⁴ Culture. Division for Cultural Properties. Department of Culture, *Menjong Druk Gi Dzong Zhi Dang Lhakhang Gyendhy, Taen Ngychey Lamsel Layshay.*

⁵ Johannes Bronkhorst, "Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism," *Brill's Indo logical Library* 11 (n.d.).

⁶ Robert A.F Thurman, "Sacred Symbols the Ritual Art of Tibet. Pdf."

illumination¹. The crossed leg reflective situated position (Lotus Position) of the Buddha expresses chorten's base, lotus steps, or the seat. The centerpiece of the body speaks to the center part of the chorten known as an arch bumpa. The top of the Buddha is illustrated as top hill peak, hamika encompassed by the little roundabout shape post, tower till acclaim sun and moon². After finishing the chorten's development, the sanctification function should be performed to cleanse or bless the chorten. In this way, vandalizing the chorten in Bhutan is an extreme offense and a serious sin according to Buddhist philosophical ideas³.

The other style chortens in vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan

There are some more significant kinds of chortens (*Stūpa*) aside from the eight wonderful commemorative stupas in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan, which are designed to honor illustrious lamas⁴ or to drive evil spirits away. In potentially dangerous places such as crossroads and passes and areas prone to landslides and accidents, they are often built to protect a region from evil spirits. The Bhutanese-primarily based conventional chortens are generally observed in small rectangular shapes assembled commonly as memorial chortens or to nail down the deceitful spirits. The principal shape of these chortens is seen with the four-sided stone's rooftops on the pinnacle⁵. In this manner, the Bhutanese-based standard chortens likewise paints a red stripe underneath the four-sided stone rooftop, demonstrating it's far from strict landmarks. It is both implicit accumulating or in a binary inside the enormous dependence on the site. It is the living novel expressions and artworks of the traditional, recognizable way of life in Bhutan. Bhutan being the shut neighbourhood with Tibet in the old days. Tibetan design had affected the country⁶. Subsequently, the chorten design is like the Tibetan custom and looks like the chortens of Tibetan style regardless of the outstanding eight Buddhist stūpas in Bhutan⁷. Every chortens carries the numerous fill treasury inclusive of jewellery, relics, and more extraordinary precious objects positioned inside, making the more substantial power of the chorten. Most of the chortens in Bhutanese shape style chortens are underneath the five forms of stūpas:

1. Relic stūpas⁸
2. Object stūpas⁹
3. Commemorative stūpas¹⁰
4. Symbolic stūpas¹¹
5. Votive stūpas.¹

¹ A T Chu-yung-kuan, "Me Second Step = the Ten Righteous Actions A-Rga7 Cho-Ga Dang Rab-Tu Gnas-Pa Don Gsal-Ba. The First Third of This Rgyal-Mtshan Dang /," 1995, 31–54.

² Robert A.F Thurman, "Sacred Symbols the Ritual Art of Tibet.pdf."

³ Bendor, "On the Indian Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dhāraṇīs in Stūpas and Images on the Indian Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dharanis in Stupas and Images."

⁴ In Tibetan Buddhism, it refers to the spiritual leader, a guru who leads or heads the monasteries.

⁵ Karma Phuntsho, *the History of Bhutan* (Random House India, 2013).

⁶ Robert A.F Thurman, "Sacred Symbols the Ritual Art of Tibet.pdf."

⁷ Seegers, "A Tibetan Stupa within the Flow of Cultural Transformations: The Opportunities and Challenges of Transplanting Buddhist Architecture from Asia to Europe."

⁸ Relics of the Buddha and other spiritual disciples are stored in it.

⁹ Objects which belong to Buddha and other spiritual followers are stored in it.

¹⁰ It is built to commemorate the great events in the life of Buddha and other spiritual followers.

¹¹ It symbolized the various aspects of the Buddhist theology.



Fig. 4 Symbolic huge stone stūpa at Tsebar pemagatshel (Jarung kharshor

There are multiple large stone stūpa ; basically, they may be made to nail down the evil spirits. It is the heavenly constructing structure amongst a wide variety of chortens in Bhutan referred to as Jarung khashor. The layout is quite much like the Boudhanath stūpa in Nepal . In Bhutan, this sort of chortens is implicitly a similar scarcity site to quell the abhorrent spirits abiding in that precise territory. This type of chortens are found in very few within Bhutan and is rarely constructed.



Fig. 5 Symbolic small square stone stūpa
image)



Fig. 6 Votive long rectangular stūpa(Courtesy: Google

¹ It is constructed to commemorate our visit or to gain the spiritual benefits.

These Bhutanese-style stupas are commonly small in size; the square fits as a fiddle. These stūpas are worked with stone layers painted red stripe on the upper level, rooftop with three-sided piece stones. It tends to be made in single or in enormous gatherings to stifle evil spirits and nagas. This plan is the living conventional culture materials of Bhutan can be seen in Fig 5. (*Tib: Lubum chorten*)

These stūpas are constructed with stones in a long square shape, forming the limitless distance on its base. Its base is consecrated with a protracted, non-stop chanting tune of the avalokiteśvara mantra. Whenever the chanting of the mantra stops, its base distance of the chorten is drawn with this unique situation. It is painted with a red stripe all around just above a certain stage upwards from the ground. Underneath the red stripe, a bent painting of deities or consecrated mantra is set as indicated by the stūpas length. Thin inflated shape stones are placed layer over the red stripe to shield from rain. On top of this three equal like a hamika are placed each in the top side and one in the top middle encompassed by slight roundabout shape, tower until acclaim solar and moon representing the lords of the three Buddha families, Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāni. It is whitewashed and may be seen one to two in each principle avoided pathway. Fig 6 shows the rectangular stūpa (*Tib: Mani dangrim chorten*).

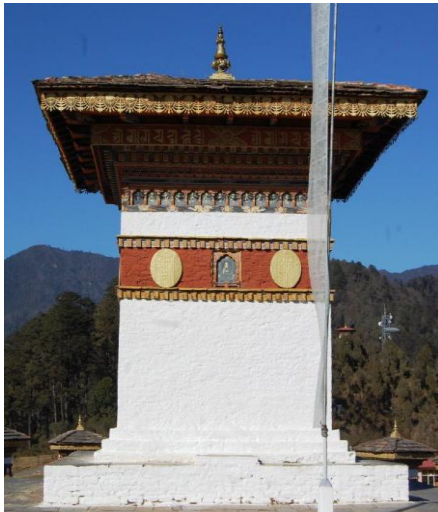


Fig.7 Votive red stripe square stūpa (Courtesy: Google image)



Fig. 8 Symbolic stūpa

These chortens (*Tib: Khangzang chorten*) are constructed with stones in a tiny square upward arisen structure with the throne base and layer of steps supporting the rising of the rectangular shape. It is painted beautifully with the red stripe with a circular white shape between the red stripe around. Above the red stripe, painted one layer of structure upholds the chorten. On top of this, the thin flat stone slab roof is placed to protect the entire chorten. It is whitewashed and constructed mainly in the hilltop areas, on a road junction, near the temple and the bypass way, and prayer flags, symbolizing the nature of the dharma and sacred place. The prominent relics of these chortens are the sacred texts, statues, mantras, incenses, butter lamps, and other sacred relics inside (see figure 7).

These types of chortens (*Tib: kang nyem Chorten*) exist mainly on major bypass footpaths, near temples or Dzongs. Its structure is the two-sided inflated base that has risen, in the middle like a

door parallel to each side, to enter from one side and exist from the other side and vice versa. All-round painted with wrathful deities, with the top ceiling with mandala. If the evil spirits follow us, and if we happen to enter through this chorten, the painting inside this chorten suppresses the evil spirits. It cannot follow us from this point, and it's the seed for the enlightenment that ever enters from this point. Owing to this, most of this chorten are built in the demonic scary site. Thus another point of constructing this chorten near temples and Dzong is in olden days without modern motor facilities, and horses are used to transport goods and even for riding. When we reach near this chorten riding with horses, everyone gets to ride off from the horse and enters through this bypass chorten, symbolizing the respect and reverence to the temples and the Dzong¹. Symbolic stūpa shows in Fig. 8.



Fig. 9 Commemorative stūpa (Courtesy: Google image)



Fig. 10 Symbolic stūpa (Courtesy: Google image)

In Bhutan, these commemorative chortens (*Tib: Kudung Chorten*) stand to commemorate the death events of the bodhisattvas (*Lama and Rinpochee*). Ku dung chorten means the burial deposit body of the spiritual bodhisattvas. After the funeral of the spiritual lama and Rinpoche, such commemorative chortens are built in the funeral site mainly to commemorate the events and act as an image or reflection of the qualities of dharmakaya. Most of these memorial chortens are in the form of enlightenment stupas with well decorated and gold paint. In vajrayāna practice, most commemorative chortens can be seen inside the Buddhist temples made with all types of offerings and well taken care of by the followers to worship as the still alive true root guru.

These sorts of chortens (*Tib: Sedok chorten*) are ordinarily visible constructed at a demonic place, landslide area, crossroad, high altitude passes, near bridges, near rivers, and the prone regions. In vajrayāna practices, the intention of this sort of chorten symbolizes the calming component of the evil spirits of that unique location. There is no such pacific structure for this chorten².

¹ Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. Thimphu bhutan. Culture. Division for Cultural Properties. Department of Culture, *Menjong Druk Gi Dzong Zhi Dang Lhakhang Gyendhy, Taen Ngychey Lamsel Layshay*. (Thimphu, Bhutan: Department of National Properties., 1996).

² Dorji Wangchuk, *Foundations of Bhutan History : A Concise Guide*., First (New Delhi: Omega Trader, New Delhi, 2016).

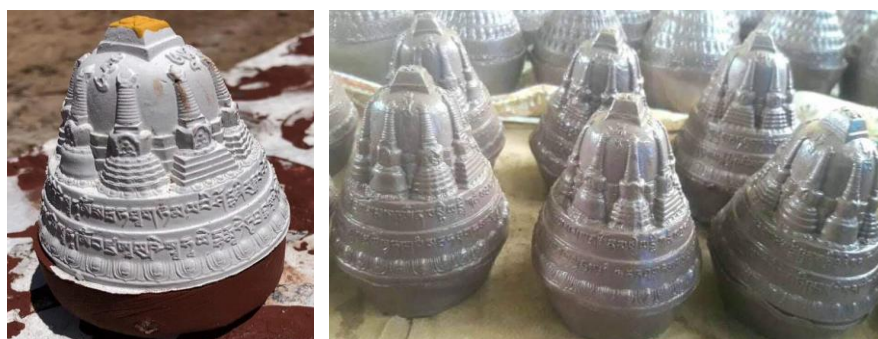


Fig. 11 Votive miniature stūpa (Courtesy: Google image)

In Bhutan, miniature chorten (*Tib: tsa-tsa*) are found, other than dzongs, chortens, and lhakhangs, comprised of little cone molded earth castings concealed in holy and sacred specialties, sticking to rocky caves, heaped high at the roof of prayers wheels, and surprisingly drifting down streams on piles of holy wood, like cedar and sandalwood. In Vajrayāna practices, it is a votive earthen offering, with each tsa-tsa is put with tender loving care and firm confidence in its abilities. Each one is a century's outmoded prayer for the well-being of a cherished person, dwelling or dead, with its precise tale to tell. In Vajrayāna practices, tsa-tsas are empowered by reciting special mantras written centuries ago by Buddhist masters; a tiny scroll of prayers or mantras right into a hollow space from the bottom are inserted in it. Ordinary earth is shaped into a receptacle of sacred power that sweetens the air around it and summons all the deities' generous energies through this empowerment rite¹.

Tsa-tsa are made to collect sturdy enhanced sticky clay with a minimum quantity of sand, which could make it good into the mold. After picking out all the small pebbles and stones, the clay is mixed with holy herbs and spices and knead until it is pliable and geared up for the mold. After putting the clay into the mold, a hole is pressed into the tsa-tsa from the bottom to contain mantras and Buddha's image². This tiny paper scroll is then tightly rolled and inserted into the bottom of the tsa-tsa, and sealed with a clay plug. After drying in the sun until tough, the tsa-tsa, then do a consecration ceremony and are placed in after location, like near a river, cliffs, secret places, etc. As the etiquette and appreciation to the tsa-tsas, wherever we come across upon them in no way pass or touch a tsa-tsa as its precise area has taken various thoughts. Despite their diminutive size, it is considered a holy powerful religious object, elicit the same powers as the largest chortens, so never step on it, understanding Buddhist spiritual practice³.

¹ Culture. Division for Cultural Properties. Department of Culture, *Menjong Druk Gi Dzong Zhi Dang Lhakhang Gyendhy, Taen Ngychey Lamsel Layshay*.

² Tshering Lama, *Dharmakaya Stupa*, ed. Waldo Ives, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Ad Graphic Pvt Ltd, 1999).

³ Wangchuk, *Foundations of Bhutan History: A Concise Guide*.



Fig: 12 Votive Stūpa



Fig: 13 Symbolic Stūpa

These chortens are the center point of all chortens, which symbolized the real manifestation of the enlightened sympathetic mind of the Buddha. Its structural development is not quite the same as other chortens as its throne top is a red stripe with the sacred mantra. Over this, there are two steps like a rooftop to the red stripe mantra. On top of this, the middle square base rises to support the upper little square part with a jewel tip. It is a rarely seen chorten in Bhutan known as Dremay nam nye chorten (see Fig. 12).

Another striking monument built in Bhutan is the rectangular stone mound chortens. The base is similar structure steps. However, it is lengthened in rectangular shape and afterward rises upwards, making like the throne of other chorten. From the rectangular throne, another rectangular base support to the three more small chorten on the top with two each in the corner and one in the center representing the avolokiteśvara, mañjuśrī, and vajrapāṇi with the sun tip whitewash known as Rigsum chorten¹.

Thus, the Bhutanese style chortens in vajrayāna tradition has limitless structure. The Bhutan chortens are constructed depending on the geographical location of the place, time, teachings, teachers, and disciples of the five perfections.

¹ Khenpo Tenzin Thinley, “The history and merits of constructing chortens,” recorded January 2021, on WeChat group

The blessing of Chortens

The merits of constructing and circumnutation of the chortens:

The Buddhist chortens in vajrayāna practices are viewed to safeguard the remaining parts and relics of extraordinary Buddhist experts. Be that as it may, in Bhutan, chortens work to one or the other avert the abhorrent spirits or pick up the benefits. There are many chorten in Bhutan, predominantly working in various spots to commemorate incredible individuals like Lord Buddha and Buddhist scholars (*Tib: Lama*) to forestall floods, storms, landslides, and mishap territories. Generally, chortens in Bhutan are developed in the holy spot, and the blessed relics are put inside the chorten. After fulfillment of the strict development, the service is performed to bless the chortens. Hence, chorten is viewed as one of the sacred places, and individuals normally visit the site of the chorten and make a series of chorten loving. It has blessed relics and compositions set inside. In the vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan, when one sees the chorten, it brings one to immediate attention, activeness, and pride because chorten are considered sacred spiritual worshiping monuments representing the mind of Buddha.

“The Buddha said that whoever sees a dharmakaya stūpa (the essence of knowledge and compassion) will be liberated by the sight of it. The breeze near the stūpa liberates by touch, and the tinkling of the small bells hanging on the stūpa liberates by sound. Once you have the experience of a stūpa, by thinking of this experience, you are liberated through recollection. When a great teacher passes away, his body disintegrates. Still, to indicate that his mind is dwelling forever in an unchanging way in the dharmakaya, his disciples will erect a stūpa as a symbol of the enlightened mind”¹.

In this manner, chorten in Bhutan is a spot for individuals to create otherworldliness and maintain a strategic distance from other destructive exercises. Destroying and vandalizing chorten in Bhutan is viewed as a grave sin, and it is additionally illegal of the state law. The amazing and effective way to cleanse off negative karma and our aggregates is to circumambulate the chorten, and that will imprint us to the path of enlightenment. It helps any individual who wants to clean negativities, the individuals who wish to make the reason for success, and the sick individuals. It is the method of rituals that benefits in different ways.

Thus, regardless of physically circumambulating the Chorten, even thinking to circumambulate before we set out will have an entirety of great inconceivable merits. Our action becomes virtuous, and our activity gets ethical, and we aggregate immeasurable merits with extremely profound cleansing. The simple method of the quick way towards enlightenment in vajrayāna Buddhism is the practice of physical circumambulation of a chortens with profound cleansing of our thoughts².

¹ HH Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche, (1910-1991) was a Vajrayana master, a family descended of Tibetan King Thrisong Detsen of the nine century.

² Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpochee, who is the Tibetan Buddhism scholars meditated for 30 years and a worldwide overseen spiritual networker

"When I circumambulate, I accumulate all three virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind. When I sit, there's only one. In terms of merit, there is no greater practice than circumambulation"¹.

In vajrayāna tradition, one of the amazing practice methods is the building of chortens, the blessing of prostrating to it, providing our services of offerings, and circumambulating². If one constructs a chorten, one could be born to offspring of a wonderful king, with a respectable body of beauty and attractive, sharp sense. One could become famous and renowned in ten directions, and one will be able to express extensively to others, one will become a leader. One will be able to help to all, One will be prominent in many ways, One will get offerings from men and divine beings, One will have much wealth, One will be able to rule the universal kingdom, one will have a long life, and one's body will resemble various Vajras endowing with the significant imprints marks and minor sign like a Buddha. One will be reborn in the three upper realms and leads to attaining nirvana quickly³. If one builds a chorten with one's own hands, even if one had committed the horrifying crimes, one will achieve this matter. If one makes a hundred thousand chortens, it's much capable of becoming knowledgeable and a famous ruler. One will also be continually born as king and will not be born into three lower realms. One will recollect one's previous life and will not be born as an abnormal being⁴. If one writes with one's hand of vajrapani mantras and place inside the chorten as one type of sacred text, that particular chorten will become blessed with the Vajra relic and sacred dharani essence of all the Tathāgatas. It will become the chorten of Tathāgatas, which incorporates the thirty-two eye mark (*Ushnisha*) of all the tathagatas. Thus whoever places the statue, images of the Buddha inside the chorten will be blessed by Tathāgata.

One who worships the chorten will become awake and become more vulnerable towards the enlightenment and will become a non-returner to the samsara. Thus even a single prostration and single circumambulation will lead not to be born in lower realms and hell. It also makes a short leading path towards enlightenment. The surroundings around the chortens will also be blessed through all Tathāgatas⁵.

Regardless of whether or not the Chorten is constructed from heaps of soil or sand, the builder will be blessed to the path of enlightenment in the time of playing. The advantages of making offerings to the chortens are immeasurable. Even if one white washes the chorten, longevity of the life spent will be expanded and will be reborn in the realms of human and god realms liberated. Thus offering a bell in front of the chorten itself will be blessed with adorable voices and able to recollect one's beyond lives.

In front of chortens, even if one turns mala (*rosary beads*) with a devoted mind can achieve different adornments and turn into the first among the fortunate ones. Whoever offers a sound of music to chorten, Will acquire the significant trust of knowledge. One will be physically good physically with pure mind and speech. One will become an incredible leader of divine beings and will encounter the extraordinary joy of accomplish liberation. On the other side, if one happens to

¹ Atisha Dipankara

² Kyabje Chadrak Sangye Dorje Rinpoche, (1913-2015) was a Tibetan Dzogchen master regarded as highly realized yogi

³ Karmavibhanga Sutra (Tib. lé nam par jépa)

⁴ Manjushri mula Tantra, (Tib. Hjam dpal rtsa rgyud, Kanjur)

⁵ Casket of Secret Relics sutra.

clean a chortens, one will become beautiful and attractive with a noble face and appearance like a lotus flower and lead to liberation from the samsara¹.

If one offers respect to chorten, one will become a brave and powerful world ruler. One will have protection with brilliant insignias. One will end up being an incredible teacher and take the experience of the Buddha². Whoever joins with fold palms before a chorten, with a noble bodhicitta attitude regardless of one hand or two hands, bows or bends their head with an undistracted mind for a few minutes will gather the accumulations of merits and clear the obscurations leading to accomplish the enlightenment³. If we make offerings with the seven precious metals to all the arhats just like a sangha member in the four directions, don't accumulate as much merit as somebody who built a chorten to the Tathāgata , the perfect enlighten one . Whoever circumambulates or makes contributions to a chorten will be honored by Tathāgatas , and decontaminate the entirety of their karmic obscurations. Regardless, the shadow of a chorten touches any creatures, whomever, they won't be born in lower realms. Thus the benefits of the chortens are extensively blissful⁴.

The important of Chorten in vajrayāna Buddhism

In vajrayāna tradition chorten as the holy entities , the individuals pay homage to the chortens by circumambulating clockwise direction around the chortens reciting prayers and mantras of the Buddha purify the negative inclinations and help all sentient beings free from their difficulties . Chortens in the Vajrayāna tradition are filled with sacred relics and consecrated accordingly with specific sacred texts. That's why the vandalism of the chorten in Bhutan is considered a criminal offense. The penal code of Bhutan⁵ stated that:

“Offences against ku sung thukten or zungs (Statues, Sacred texts, chorten, and relics) are a punishable offense with the felony of the first degree. A person convicted of such offense will have to serve a minimum person term of fifteen years and maximum of life imprisonment.”

Thus such incredible chortens even an accidental circumambulation purifies our negativities and accumulates greater merits. Consequently, even creatures, if coincidentally circumambulate chortens make powerful causes for the next rebirth and enlightenment⁶. The visual effect of the chorten brings immediate experiences of alertness and peacefulness. In vajrayāna tradition , chortens are kept on being constructed on the account of their capacity to free the sentient beings, remove obstacles on the path, gather favorable circumstances, and accomplish all aspirations, who just see their shape and consider the construction of chorten itself is the ritual⁷. Since early

¹ Saddharma Pundarika Sutra or Lotus sutra (Tib: dam chos padma dkar po'i mdo)

² Avalokitesvara Sutra, (Tib. spyen ras gzig Kyi mdo)

³ Lama Thubten Zopa Ripochee, is from Nepal and a Tibetan Buddhist scholar who had formed the organization foundation for preservation of Mahayana Buddhism.

⁴ HH Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche, (1910-1991) was a Vajrayana master, a family descended of Tibetan King Thrisong Detsen of the nine century.

⁵ It is the consolidation of sections in existing acts of the country that deals with criminal offences.

⁶ Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, is from Nepal and a Tibetan Buddhist scholar who had formed the organization foundation for preservation of Mahayana Buddhism.

⁷ HH Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche, (1910-1991) was a Vajrayana master, a family descended of Tibetan King Thrisong Detsen of the nine century.

Buddhist chorten was not only a container of the physical relics of the Buddha, but also a symbol and a reminder of his enlightenment and his nirvana. It became the presence of the Buddha, who is absent in the samsara, the intrinsic presence of the transcendent¹. The chorten in which the various types of relics were deposited became in and of itself a relic and considered as one of the sacred monuments in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan . Thus considering to this point the constitution of Bhutan stated in article four-under culture as:

“The state shall endeavor to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage of the country, including monuments, places and objects of artistic or historical interest, Dzongs, Lhakhangs, Goendeys, Ten-sum, Nyes, language, literature, music, visual arts, and religion to enrich society and the cultural life of the citizens”².

Thus, chorten in Bhutan is considered a true receptacle chorten constructed according to its requirement and consecrated by highly vulnerable masters in the proper etiquette of the dharma . The parallel idea on the stūpas was stated as:

“Nowadays, even though a stūpa is constructed for the sake of any person , if relics of the Tathāgata are deposited there, it is necessary to make all the elements in the form of anyone among the eight which is suitable”³.

Hence, all the Chorten built in vajrayāna tradition are considered as the chorten of Buddha. If the relics like sacred dharma texts, dharmakaya, statues, and other sacred relics are deposited, and that praises the chorten as the dharma body and mind of the Buddha, making the blessed full power of the chorten. Thus every single classification of the structural chorten that exists in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan has a unique symbolism to nature, the cultural diversity, and spiritual development of the people in Bhutan.

Conclusion

This research aimed to study the Buddhist stūpas and its symbolism in vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan. In vajryāna tradition, chortens are considered one of the sacred religious monuments and have preserved these sacred monuments since a long time back. It can be concluded that every aspect of the chortens symbolized its uniqueness in vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan , and people do believe and respect every chorten as the representation of Buddha “a thugten.”

Initially, the development of stūpa dates back to Buddha’s period. When Buddha instructed his disciples to construct the first stupa by laying folded square garments on the ground, putting his begging bowl upside down on top of this , erected with his mendicant stuff . Making thereby the first stupa in śravakayana (Tib: Nyan-thos kyi thakpa). A stūpa with a twelve square or round step shape on top of the square base with a circular wheel of eight spokes is the stupa of the pratyekabuddha yana (Tib:Jangsam kyi thakpa). On the top of the square base is the round vase (Tib:Bumpa) like a monk begging alms bowl put upside down with the square harmika (Tib: Dray) on top and like an eight victory banner stupas making in the shape as a great mandala is the Mahayana stūpa.

¹ Bentor, “The Content of Stupas and Images and the Indo-Tibetan Concept of Relics.”

² Royal Government of Bhutan, *the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan*, 2008.

³ Taktsang Lotsawa Sherab Rinchen was the Madhyamika philosopher and a sakyapa scholar monk.(1405-1477)

The differentiation of the stūpas with its structural symbolism seems to have less relevance in Vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan where every mound of Bhutanese chortens consecrated is considered to be a chorten of Buddha by virtue of Buddha's relics deposited in it of which the initial evolution of the Buddhist stūpas is listed with the three yantras in the Buddhist tradition.

The Tibetan types of eight chortens are revealed in Tibet when the Guru Padmasambhava first started his architecture and built the lhasa samye temple. And that the design of the chortens was the same structural design with eight different chortens built relating to the occasion that took over by the Buddha Shakyamuni in eight distinctive sacred places of Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Varanasi, Shravasti, Shankasa, Rajgir, Vaishali, and Kushinagar in Nepal and India.

Hence the construction of chortens in vajrayāna tradition in Bhutan is considered one of the greatest merits for cleansing the negative karma. In May 2007, as per the media report of the national assembly of Bhutan, the ministry of home and culture affairs minister informed that there are nine thousand six hundred two chortens in Bhutan as per the record of the ministry. To this extent, people of vajrayāna practitioners in Bhutan seem to understand the symbolism of chortens and its perceptive by looking into the construction projects of chortens around the country that get into the country countdown of more numbers every year. Thus I can conclude that more spiritual people in Bhutan are constructing chorten basically to wave off their evil spirits as a ritual for the community, nation, self, and the benefits of all sentient beings.

Moreover, every year in Bhutan, more volunteers and non-government organizations are upholding the spirits of volunteerism services for whitewashing chorten across the country. Still, more people are vandalizing the monuments searching for sacred relics, even though Bhutan's penal code stated that the vandalism of Chorten is a felony of the first degree. Notably, most of the Bhutanese style Chorten are structured with the help of stones and mud in olden days in the far flank side of the village, which makes it easy for vandalism. To this extent vajrayāna tradition as a state religion in Bhutan, suggests that the culture of chorten and its symbolism in vajrayāna tradition's unique characteristics should be imparted to the young mind Bhutanese people through various means. Thus, Bhutan being rich in cultural diversity, our generation should not be complacent. Instead, it is the right time for us to nurture our younger generation on various Buddhist cultural symbolisms in Bhutan.

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