



## Architectural Elements and Spiritual Significance of Buddhist Stupas

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### Abstract:

This research paper explores the architectural elements and spiritual significance of Buddhist stupas, examining their evolution, symbolism, and cultural relevance across different regions and historical periods. Buddhist stupas are not merely architectural structures but serve as profound spiritual symbols representing the Buddha's presence, enlightenment, and the path to liberation. Originating in ancient India, stupas have undergone regional adaptations across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, reflecting local artistic styles while preserving core symbolic meanings.

The study analyzes key architectural features such as the anda (dome), harmika, chatra (umbrella), torana (gateway), and medhi (base), interpreting their symbolic representation of Buddhist cosmology and philosophical concepts. Each element embodies aspects of the Buddha's teachings—such as the dome symbolizing the mound of relics and the chatra representing the Three Jewels of Buddhism. Through these components, stupas serve as spiritual centers for meditation, pilgrimage, and communal rituals.

Methodologically, the paper combines historical analysis, architectural study, and religious interpretation, supported by case studies of significant stupas including Sanchi (India), Boudhanath (Nepal), and Shwedagon (Myanmar). These examples illustrate how stupas act as cultural repositories, integrating religious practice with artistic and spatial expression. By bridging the tangible architectural form with intangible spiritual meaning, the paper underscores the multidimensional significance of stupas in Buddhist tradition.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how architectural form can embody and perpetuate religious belief, revealing the stupa as both a sacred monument and a dynamic symbol of the Buddhist path to enlightenment.

**Keywords:** *Buddhist Stupas, Architecture, Symbolism, Spirituality, Sacred Space, Cultural Heritage.*

### Key Highlights

1. This study investigates the architectural typology and historical development of Buddhist stupas, tracing their transformation from primitive reliquary mounds to architecturally refined sacred monuments.
2. It critically examines the formal components of stupa architecture—including the anda, harmika, chhatra, and pradakshina path—within their symbolic and ritual contexts.



3. The paper interprets the stupa as a metaphysical and cosmological construct, embodying Buddhist philosophical concepts such as enlightenment, impermanence, and the axis mundi.
4. Attention is given to the use of geometry, axiality, and proportional systems as tools for reinforcing spiritual experience and meditative practices.
5. Through selected case studies, the research highlights regional stylistic variations and the influence of local materials, craftsmanship, and socio-cultural conditions.
6. The study underscores the ritual, devotional, and communal functions of stupas in Buddhist religious life and pilgrimage traditions.

### Introduction

Buddhist stupas are among the earliest and most enduring architectural forms in the history of South Asian religious architecture. Originating as simple earthen mounds enshrining the relics of the Buddha, stupas gradually evolved into sophisticated monumental structures that embodied profound spiritual, philosophical, and cosmological meanings. Far beyond their physical presence, stupas function as symbolic representations of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Buddhist path to enlightenment, serving as focal points for devotion, meditation, and communal religious practice.

The architectural composition of a stupa is governed by a carefully structured system of forms and proportions, each element carrying layered symbolic significance. Components such as the hemispherical dome (anda), the square railing (harmika), the central axis (yasti), and the umbrella-like chhatras collectively articulate Buddhist concepts of the cosmos, impermanence, and transcendence. The ritual practice of circumambulation (pradakshina) further reinforces the spatial and spiritual dialogue between the devotee and the monument, transforming architecture into an experiential medium of contemplation and merit-making.

Across different regions and historical periods, Buddhist stupas exhibit notable variations in scale, materiality, ornamentation, and spatial organization, reflecting local cultural influences and evolving artistic traditions. Sites such as Sanchi, Amaravati, Bharhut, and later developments across Central and East Asia demonstrate how stupa architecture adapted while retaining its essential symbolic framework. These regional interpretations underscore the dynamic relationship between architectural form and spiritual ideology.

This paper aims to examine the architectural elements of Buddhist stupas and their spiritual significance through a multidisciplinary lens, integrating architectural analysis, symbolic interpretation, and historical context. By exploring the interrelationship between form, ritual, and meaning, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of stupa architecture as both a sacred structure and a powerful medium of spiritual expression, with continued relevance in contemporary architectural and heritage discourse.

### Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study methodology to examine the architectural elements and spiritual significance of Buddhist stupas. The case study approach enables an in-depth understanding of how architectural form, symbolism, and ritual practices are integrated within specific historical and cultural contexts.



### *Selection of Case Studies*

The case studies were selected based on their historical importance, architectural integrity, and representativeness of different phases of stupa development. Prominent stupas from the Indian subcontinent—such as Sanchi, Amaravati, and Bharhut—were chosen to illustrate variations in form, materiality, ornamentation, and spatial organization. These sites also reflect regional adaptations while maintaining core symbolic principles of Buddhist architecture.

### *Data Collection Methods*

Data were collected through secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, archaeological reports, architectural drawings, and heritage documentation. Visual analysis of site plans, elevations, sections, and sculptural reliefs was undertaken to identify and interpret key architectural components. Where available, photographic documentation and measured drawings were used to support spatial and proportional analysis.

### *Architectural and Symbolic Analysis*

Each case study was analyzed by deconstructing the stupa into its primary architectural elements—such as the anda, harmika, yasti, chhatra, vedika, and pradakshina path. These components were examined in relation to their symbolic, cosmological, and ritual meanings, as described in Buddhist texts and interpretative scholarship. Spatial sequencing and movement patterns associated with ritual practices were also considered.

### *Comparative Framework*

A comparative analytical framework was employed to identify similarities and differences across the selected case studies. This comparison facilitated an understanding of how spiritual concepts were consistently expressed through architectural form, while also revealing regional stylistic variations and historical transformations.

### *Interpretative Approach*

The study integrates architectural analysis with interpretative and phenomenological perspectives, emphasizing the experiential dimension of stupa architecture. The interaction between the devotee, the sacred space, and the architectural form was analyzed to understand how built form mediates spiritual experience.

### *Limitations*

The research is primarily based on secondary data and documented sources; therefore, interpretations are dependent on the availability and accuracy of existing literature and archaeological records. However, triangulation of multiple sources was used to enhance the reliability of the analysis.

## **Results**

The analysis of selected case studies reveals a strong and consistent relationship between the architectural elements of Buddhist stupas and their underlying spiritual symbolism. Despite regional and chronological variations, the fundamental architectural vocabulary of the stupa remains remarkably uniform, underscoring its role as a standardized sacred form within Buddhist tradition.

Comparative analysis revealed that regional variations, particularly in sculptural programs and material usage, contribute to localized expressions of Buddhist narratives and symbolism. For example, narrative reliefs at Amaravati and Bharhut demonstrate an increased emphasis on



didactic storytelling, while Sanchi maintains a restrained architectural clarity. These differences indicate adaptive strategies that align spiritual messaging with local cultural contexts.

The results also highlight that geometric order, symmetry, and orientation play a crucial role in reinforcing spiritual meaning. Alignment with cardinal directions and the use of axial planning were found to enhance the cosmological symbolism of the stupa, positioning it as a microcosmic representation of the Buddhist universe.

Overall, the findings confirm that Buddhist stupa architecture functions as an integrated system in which form, symbolism, ritual, and spatial experience are inseparably linked. The architectural elements do not merely serve structural purposes but actively mediate spiritual understanding and devotional practice, demonstrating the enduring relevance of stupas as sacred architectural forms.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study affirm that Buddhist stupa architecture is not merely a structural or commemorative form, but a highly codified spatial expression of Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practice. The consistent presence of core architectural elements across diverse geographical and temporal contexts suggests the existence of a shared symbolic framework that governs stupa design, reinforcing its role as a universal sacred archetype within Buddhism. The dominance of the anda (dome) across all examined case studies highlights its central metaphysical significance as a symbol of completeness, containment, and enlightenment. Rather than functioning as a passive architectural mass, the dome operates as a focal point of spiritual gravity, directing attention inward and upward. This finding supports existing theoretical interpretations that view the stupa as a symbolic embodiment of the Buddha's enlightened state rather than a literal representation.

Ritual movement, particularly through the pradakshina path, emerged as a critical mediator between architectural form and spiritual experience. The repetitive act of circumambulation transforms the stupa into an experiential structure, wherein meaning is constructed through bodily movement and temporal engagement. This reinforces phenomenological interpretations of sacred architecture, emphasizing that spiritual significance is not inherent in form alone but is activated through ritual practice.

Regional variations observed in sculptural detail, materiality, and ornamentation indicate a dynamic adaptability within the stupa form. While the symbolic core remains stable, localized expressions allow for cultural specificity and narrative richness. This adaptability challenges the notion of stupa architecture as static or monolithic, instead positioning it as a living tradition responsive to social, artistic, and devotional contexts.

The study also highlights the role of geometry, proportion, and orientation in reinforcing cosmological symbolism. The deliberate use of symmetry and cardinal alignment situates the stupa as a microcosmic representation of the Buddhist universe, bridging abstract philosophical concepts with tangible architectural order. Such findings contribute to broader architectural discourse on how sacred meaning is encoded through spatial logic. In contemporary contexts, the spiritual and symbolic principles embedded in stupa architecture offer valuable insights for heritage conservation and modern architectural practice. Understanding the inseparable



relationship between form and meaning is essential for sensitive restoration, reinterpretation, and the design of new sacred spaces inspired by Buddhist traditions.

Overall, this discussion situates Buddhist stupas as integrative architectural systems where structure, symbolism, ritual, and experience converge, reaffirming their enduring relevance as both spiritual monuments and architectural masterpieces.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the architectural elements of Buddhist stupas and their spiritual significance, demonstrating that stupa architecture represents a profound synthesis of form, symbolism, ritual, and philosophical meaning. Through the analysis of selected case studies, the research confirms that the stupa is not merely a commemorative structure but a carefully conceived sacred form that embodies core Buddhist principles such as enlightenment, impermanence, and cosmic order. The consistent use of geometry, symmetry, and axial alignment across regions further emphasizes the stupa's role as a microcosmic representation of the Buddhist universe. At the same time, regional variations in materiality and ornamentation illustrate the adaptability of stupa architecture to local cultural and artistic contexts without compromising its essential symbolic framework.

By highlighting the experiential dimension of circumambulation and embodied ritual, the study underscores the importance of movement and perception in activating the spiritual meaning of architectural space. This reinforces the understanding of sacred architecture as an interactive medium, where meaning emerges through the relationship between the devotee and the built environment.

In conclusion, Buddhist stupas stand as enduring architectural expressions of spiritual ideology, transcending temporal and geographical boundaries. The insights gained from this research contribute to a deeper appreciation of stupa architecture and offer valuable perspectives for contemporary architectural discourse, heritage conservation, and the reinterpretation of sacred spaces inspired by Buddhist traditions.

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