

# མཚོན་རྟེན་ །

## ***EXPLANATION ON THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUPA***

### ***What is a Stupa ?***

A *Stupa*, or *Pagoda*, or *Chod-rTen* in Tibetan is a reliquary, a sacred monument containing relics of the Buddha or other holy beings. “Chod-rTen“ is 2 words, Chod and rTen. “Chod“ means a devotional offering. “rTen“ means an object. Together they mean a sacred devotional offering for the purpose of creating boundless Virtue and Merit within a single action and within a brief moment.

The Stupa is the physical representation of full enlightenment. It is a spiritually inspiring sacred monument which makes the mind more conducive to calmness and peacefulness. The Stupa represents the spiritual map of the path to enlightenment as well as the ultimate result of the successful training on the path based on the strong foundation of ethics.

In general, there are eight traditional Stupas and each one represents great events in the life of the Lord Buddha such as turning the wheel of Dharma, conception in his mother's womb, passing away from the world, etc. In other words, the Stupas are the physical representations of Lord Buddha's great enlightened activities performed on the earth. The eight traditional Stupas are :

1. Lotus piled Stupa
2. Bodhi Stupa
3. Dharma wheel Stupa
4. Miraculous Stupa
5. Descended from Tushita Stupa
6. Harmonious Stupa
7. Supreme victory Stupa
8. Pari-nirvana Stupa

For example, the stupa that was recently built in Bomdila, North-East India, in memory of our late friend and teacher Geshe Ngawang Phuntsok, was a type called “*Bodhi-Stupa*“ which means “*enlightenment Stupa*”. The shape and the structure of each of these eight Stupas are slightly different but fundamentally have the same significance.



## *What is the significance of the various structural parts of the Stupa?*



The root or the base of the Stupa is called " *smang-shi* " which literally means "foundation". The foundation of the Stupa must be a little bigger and wider than the actual Stupa itself. The strong , stable, and deeply grounded foundation of the Stupa represents the *ethics of ten virtues* as an indispensable foundation for enlightenment.

Above the base or foundation, there is a circular opened Lotus serving as a seat or cushion for a sacred image – in this case the Stupa. Above the Lotus, there are four levels or steps like a stair case. The actual Stupa starts from the first of the four levels or steps.



The four levels or steps represent the various stages of the path. The first of the four levels represents the four *mindfulnesses*. Mindfulness is the first and foremost important factor for training the wild and crazy mind of samsaric beings. Mindfulness is a tool for keeping your mind, thoughts and ideas within your reach, clearly knowing what they really are and their potential for misleading our actions and deeds. In general, mindfulness means " *being in the present moment and wholly aware of whatever is happening in the present moment*".



The four Mindfulnesses are :

Mindfulness of body.

Mindfulness of feelings.

Mindfulness of mind.

Mindfulness of phenomena that are not the part of body, feelings & the mind.



Mindfulness of body means a fresh state of awareness of the *body* as a nest for impurities, malaise, infection, and, therefore, not worthy of being an object for attachment, lust, and desire.

Mindfulness of feelings means a fresh state of awareness that *feelings* or *sensations* may give momentary satisfaction but are, by their changing nature, actually pain and suffering. Their ultimate outcome is unsought pain, suffering, agony and dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction is a deep latent form of real pain and suffering that causes us to be very unhappy and self-annoyed.



Mindfulness of mind means a fresh state of awareness of the *Mind* being instantaneous, in flux, wild, unruly, untamed, troublesome, extremely tricky and deceptive, not to be trusted. That is why we are misled by our own mind during most of the time of our life.

Mindfulness of phenomena means a fresh state of awareness of *phenomena* being empty of any intrinsic existence and, therefore, not existing at all in the sense of matching the way that they appear to our naive and dualistic mind.

The functions of the four mindfulnesses is to serve as a powerful antidote to our deeply ingrained sense of attachment, lust, desire, sense of permanence and grasping.





The second of the four levels represents the four **perfect abandonments**. Here the actual meaning of perfect abandonment refers to the high quality of diligence in making effort to eliminate non-virtues and to develop and increase the virtues through knowing the clear distinction of what is **non-virtue** and what is **virtue**.



The four perfect abandonment are :

Abandonment of non-virtues that have been produced.

Abandonment of non-virtues that have not yet been produced.

Increase of virtues that have been produced.

Exerting effort in generating virtues that have not yet been produced.



The first two are mindful efforts to stop or eliminate the non-virtues that have or have not been produced in our mindstream. The last two are mindful efforts to make sure to increase virtues that are present in our mindstream and to generate those virtues that are not yet in our mindstream.



The third of the four levels represents the four **legs of miracles**. They are:

That of aspiration.

That of perseverance.

That of intention.

That of analysis.



That of aspiration refers to the aspiration stemming from the lucid faith in the virtues of positive actions, deeds, words and thoughts.

That of perseverance refers to the unwavering determination to continue the spiritual journey without becoming discouraged or disheartened.

That of intention refers to the strong familiarity with various practices gained through the long process of training the mind.

That of analysis refers to the sharp analytic mind gained through the process of analysis on the instructions and their effective functions.

Since these 4 qualities act as acceleration for the path leading to Nirvana or full Enlightenment, therefore, they are named **legs of miracles**.



The fourth of the four levels represents the **five powers**. **Panca indriya** is the original sanskrit term for five powers. They are :

The power of lucid faith.

The power of effort.

The power of mindfulness.

The power of concentration.

The power of wisdom.

The power of lucid faith refers to the trust in the natural goodness of the virtues.

The power of effort refers to the joyful effort of performing virtues.

The power of mindfulness refers to the non-forgetfulness of the object of virtues.

The power of concentration refers to the mind's unwavering attention to the object of virtues.

The power of wisdom refers to the discerning force of the mind.





These **five powers** purify the pitfalls of the path and empower the process of attaining Nirvana or full Enlightenment. Therefore, they are named “ **five powers** “.



On the top of these four levels or steps which start right above the wide foundation, there is a circular lotus that serves as a cushion that supports the Vase. This round lotus represents the five forces. **Pancabala** is the original sanskrit term for the *five forces*.

The **five forces** are:

The force of faith.

The force of diligence

The force of mindfulness.

The force of concentration.

The force of wisdom.

They are called “ *forces* “ because they act as powerful counter-forces towards their opposite factors which are 1. non-faith, 2. laziness, 3. forgetfulness, 4. distraction, and 5. corrupted wisdom.



Above the circle of the Lotus cushion sits a **Vase** that has a *round* or *globular* or *spherical* shape. The **Vase** represents what is called “ **the seven limbs of enlightenment** or **auxiliaries to enlightenment** “. They are :

Mindfulness.

Discriminative sharp faculty.

Unwavering effort.

Non-dual feeling of joy.

Suppleness or agility.

Concentration infused with bliss.

Equanimity ( neither attraction nor repulsion nor indifference )

These are called the “ *seven Limbs of enlightenment* “ because they the most essential factors or causes for attaining Nirvana or full Enlightenment.

Particularly, the non-dual feelings of joy, suppleness and equanimity make the mind strong, firm and capable of effortlessly remaining in a single-pointed concentrated state for as long the individual wishes to remain in that state.





The small square that sits above the vase represents the ***eight-fold noble path***. The eight-fold noble path is the elaboration of the four noble truths. The eight-fold Noble path is :

Right view.

Right thought.

Right action.

Right speech.

Right livelihood.

Right effort.

Right mindfulness.

Right concentration.

The Eight-fold noble path is called “ Noble “ because it is actually part of the *Arya's* path leading closer to Nirvana or Enlightenment.



The right view refers to the view of emptiness or selflessness.

The right thought refers to the pure intention that leads to the right actions of body, speech and mind.

The right action refers to *not killing, not stealing, no sexual misconduct.*

The right speech refers to *not lying, no slander, no harsh or insulting words, no idle chit chat or rumors.*

The right livelihood refers to the *means of earning a living that is harmless to other living creatures.*

The right effort refers to the *effort* that is infused with joy and prevents us from becoming discouraged due to the long and painful journey along the path to Nirvana.

The right mindfulness refers to the *non-forgetfulness* and *being wholly aware* without going through thinking and conceptualization.

The right concentration refers to the powerful *pointedness* of mind that allows our mind to be able to penetrate deep into the truth of reality.



And also, the four sides or corners of this flat square that sits above the *Vase* represents the four wisdoms or what is sometimes called “ the wisdom eyes “. The four wisdom eyes are:

Mirror-like wisdom.

Wisdom of equality.

Wisdom of discrimination.

Wisdom of activity.







The Mirror-like wisdom sees every existing phenomena clearly and vividly just as a mirror reflects clearly and without distortion.

The wisdom of equality regards all sentient beings as equal just as the sun shines equally on the entire earth without being biased.

The wisdom of discrimination sees all phenomena as they really are without confusion or misunderstanding or mixing one with another.

The wisdom of activity performs diverse activities to fulfill the needs and wishes of all beings in a timely manner.

These wisdoms act as an eye to see things clearly. Therefore, it is traditional to draw an eye on the face of this flat square right above the Vase of the Stupa. In modern days, people call this eye a “*Third Eye*”.

However, traditionally, it is the inner wisdom eye or the wisdom truth body.

***Jnanadharmakaya*** is the Sanskrit term, which means the *Wisdom Truth body*.



On the top of the Vase is what is called ten Dharma-wheels or the Dharma Cakra. Then ten Dharma-cakra represents the ten exalted wisdoms realizing the truth of reality nakedly without reference to the name, concept, idea, label or description and free of intellectualization. These ten exalted wisdoms are the direct result of the 37 noble aspects of Enlightenment as listed above in their natural stages of development.



Above the ten Wheels is the sacred umbrella, ***Chatra*** in Sanskrit. The sacred umbrella represents the enlightened beings' great Compassion that gives cooling relief to all sentient beings from their burning pain and suffering in all time and space.

Above the sacred umbrella is the moon and sun. The moon represents method or skillful means for benefiting all sentient beings. The sun represents the Wisdom that ensures that the act of helping is highly beneficial and done in a timely manner without any possibility for it to be harmful. And also, the Moon and sun represent the enlightened activities for dispelling the darkness of ignorance in the minds of all sentient beings and thus the sprout of pain and suffering is eliminated and the light of happiness will fully shine. No parts of the earth are untouched by the light of the moon and sun.



Above the moon and sun is the protrusion or pinnacle, ***Ketu*** in Sanskrit. This protrusion represents the *perfect state of enlightenment, the highest state of attainment, among all forms of the high there is none above this state*. Literally, it means **the highest state**.





Enlightenment is considered as the highest state and there is none above. It is an entity consisting of the perfection of two things:  
The perfection of the elimination of all that is to be eliminated.  
The perfection of the attainment of all that is to be attained.



In the state of enlightenment, there is nothing left that needs to be eliminated and there is nothing left that needs to be realized. It is the total culmination of the perfection.

### **What are the spiritual benefits of making offerings, performing prostrations, paying homage and circumambulating the Stupa ?**



In general, the spiritual benefits of making offerings such as butter lamps, candles, flowers, and incense, etc. can not be measured by our ordinary mind. Similarly, performing prostrations, paying homage and humble respect, and circumambulating around the Stupa can not be measured by our ordinary mind. It is surely boundless and beyond the ordinary means of measurement.



What I can boldly say the gist of the benefit is:

It surely creates great *merit* and *virtue* that makes you succeed in every task that you undertake in this life as well as in your next life.

It shuts the door of lower realms and opens the door of higher realms.

It surely helps to gain rebirth in human form with conducive conditions for evolving higher and better in each lifetime.

It certainly helps to prevent many of the natural disasters and calamities around the world, particularly in the local region.

It surely helps to create a sense of peace and harmony.

It surely helps to plant a fresh seed for spiritual realization.

It serves as an immediate aid to humble ourselves and to develop a sense of joyful feeling of devotion and admiration towards the enlightened beings with a strong wish for ourselves to become enlightened.

The person who financed the construction of the Stupa will surely receive immense *merit* and *virtue* in all of his or her future rebirths and lives until the mother earth ceases to exist.

The person who financed the construction of the Stupa becomes like a boundless field for the cultivation of spiritual crops for millions and million of beings and from generation to generation.

It brings joy and spiritual inspiration to the hearts and the minds of millions of devotees.

It helps to subdue all agitations caused by evil spirits.

It helps the place where it is located to be a place for spiritual attraction.

It surely serves as a sacred object for spiritual enjoyment and induces an uplifted state of mind for those who witness it.

