

The Great Stupa at Sanchi

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The Great Stupa at Sanchi has some unique and important physical characteristics. This lesson covers:



BIG IDEA

The Great Stupa at Sanchi is an example of a sacred Buddhist reliquary, a three-dimensional mandala, and the oldest stone structure in India.

1. Period and Location: The Great Stupa at Sanchi

The Great Stupa at Sanchi was originally constructed under the reign of the Emperor Ashoka during the 3rd century BC. There have been renovations and additions over the centuries, but the first major reconstruction began in the 2nd century BC, after it was severely damaged. Sanchi, where the stupa is located, is situated roughly in the middle of the Indian subcontinent.

The timeline below highlights the period covered in this lesson.



The map below shows the Great Stupa's location.



2. The Buddha

Stupas are structures built to hold Buddhist sacred physical objects, or relics.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of a stupa that was built to house some of the cremated remains of the Buddha.



Stupa at Northern Torana

The stupa pictured above is a mound of earth about 50 feet high. It is faced with stone, and the relic is housed within it. Unlike later Christian relics, which were on display, these relics weren't intended for public viewing and are essentially buried within the stupa. The stupa itself functions as a place for meditation.



THINK ABOUT IT

Interestingly, the Buddha himself is missing. He's represented symbolically, but not in human form. Unlike later artwork that depicts the Buddha as a human, this wasn't the custom of the time. The belief was that the Buddha had transcended his physical form upon achieving enlightenment. This artwork is a form of mandala.



TERMS TO KNOW

Stupa

A sacred spot, in memory of the Buddha or a saint, designated by a mound of earth or other materials

3. The Toranas

There are four **toranas**, or gates, that correspond to the four cardinal directions: north, east, south, and west. The southern gate is the oldest, while the northern gate is the best preserved. Elaborate sculpture depicting stories from the life of the Buddha covers the gates.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is a closeup of part of the northern torana, or gate, from the Great Stupa at Sanchi.



Northern torana

The wheel was a form of symbolism used to represent the Buddha, rather than a physical likeness. Take a look at the above image one more time. Can you see the wheels in the artwork?

➤ **EXAMPLE** The next two images are some exterior views of the Great Stupa at Sanchi. Here you can clearly see the dome and some scaffolding. This structure is most likely a renovation project.



Exterior views of the Great Stupa at Sanchi

➤ **EXAMPLE** Here's an even better picture of the stone face of the dome, as well as one of the toranas forming the exterior stone wall:



Dome and Eastern torana



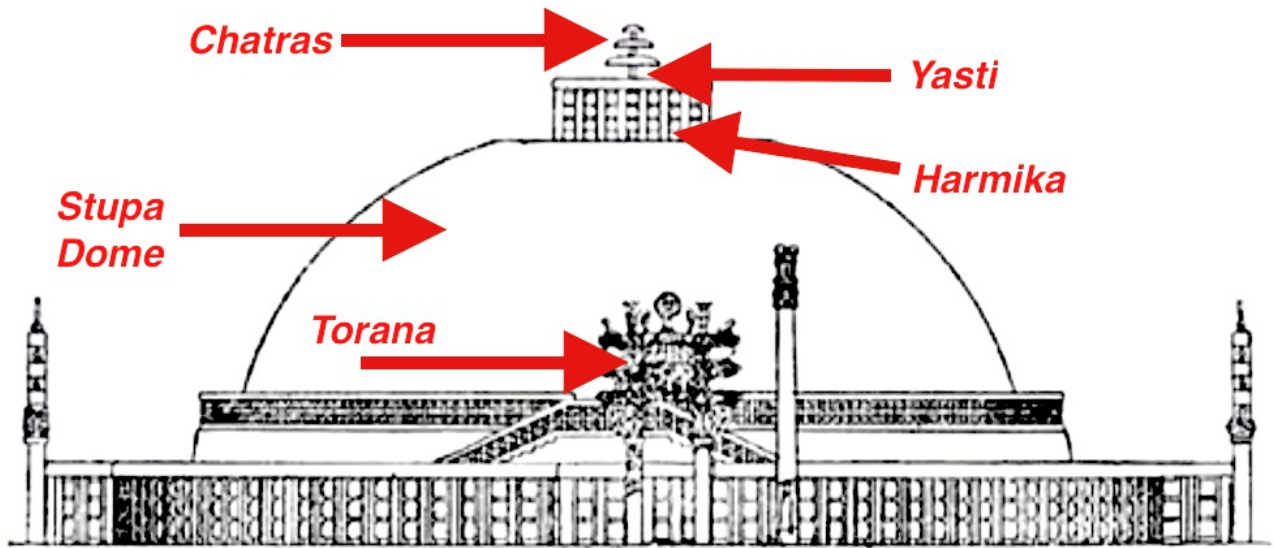
TERM TO KNOW

Torana (gate)

In Hindu and Buddhist architecture, a type of gateway.

4. Diagram of the Elements

The diagram below of the Great Stupa illustrates many of the key terms in this lesson (noted in red with arrows).



The **yasti** is the pole that's extended up from the top of the dome, and the three circular stone plates attached to the east are called chakras. The **harmika** is the gated section on top of the stupa, and it is a sacred space not to be entered. A torana is a gate. Finally, note the stupa dome itself.



TERMS TO KNOW

Harmika

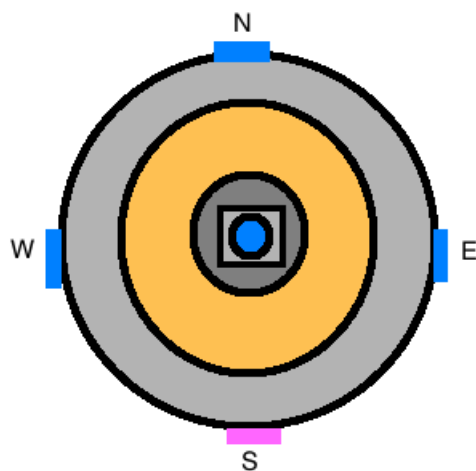
A small platform with a railing located at the top of a stupa

Yasti

Symbolizes the universe; a circular disk positioned on top of the dome of the stupa

5. Overhead Diagram

Next is an overhead diagram of the Great Stupa:



This gives you a better idea of how the stupa functions as a three-dimensional **mandala**, with its concentric layout. The purpose of the stupa wasn't to display the sacred relic, but to function as a place of meditation in the presence of the sacred relic.

Meditators move in a clockwise direction, making two rotations around the stupa in what's referred to as **circumambulation**. The first turn would be in the innermost area, between the outer wall and the dome itself, in that light grey area. The second turn would be around the raised platform area attached to the dome itself.



TERMS TO KNOW

Mandala

A concentric diagram with spiritual and ritual importance in Buddhism and Hinduism

Circumambulation

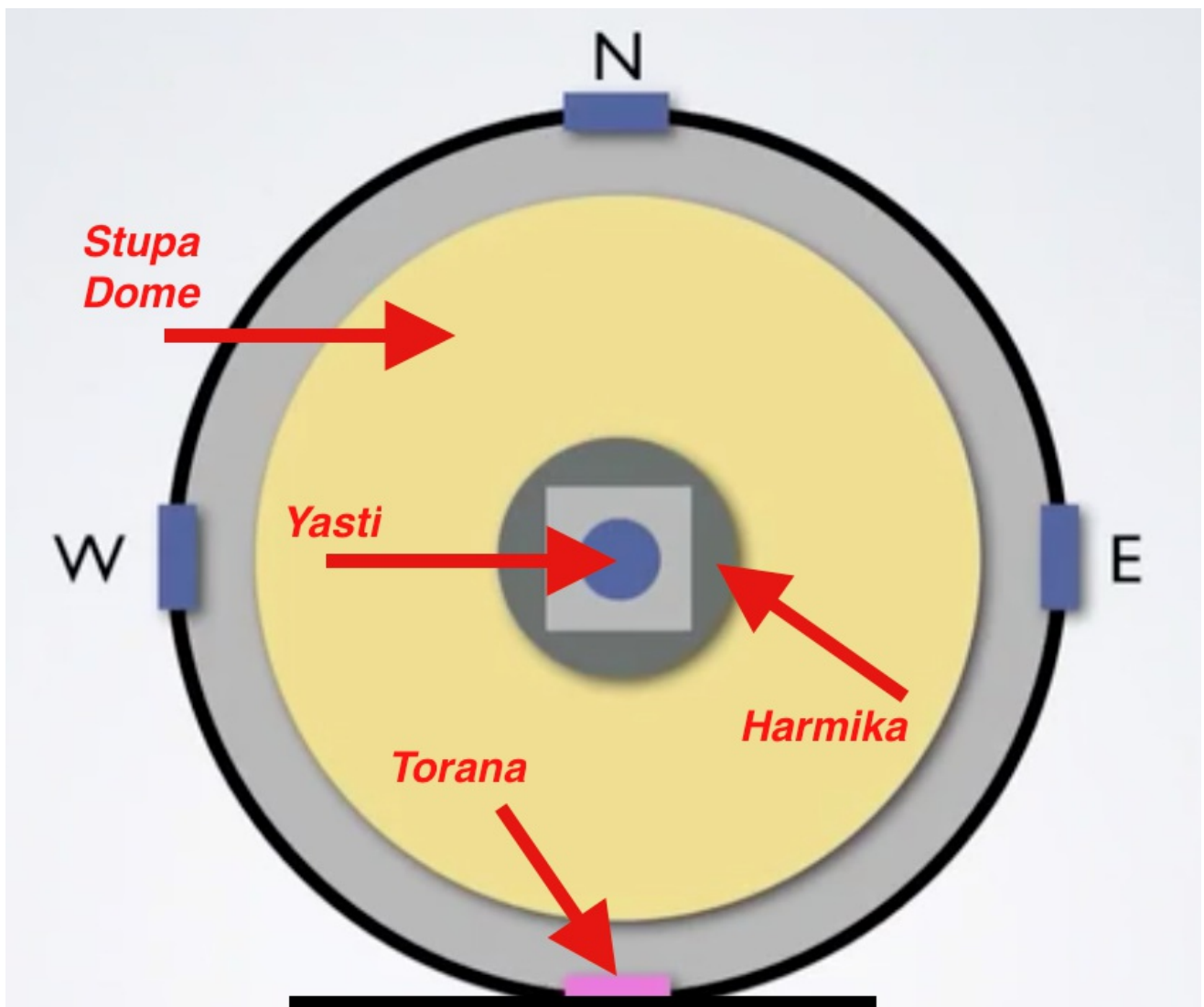
The act of circling around a sacred or deity object

6. Diagrams of Harmika and Toranas

Inside the harmika is a pole called a yasti, which symbolizes the universe and forms a connection between the Earth and heaven, or an axis mundi. Some features of this structure include:

- The harmika
- The stupa dome
- The torana(s)

Here is a diagram of these features:



The next three images are of the north, east, and west toranas. Take notice of how each one is just slightly different from the others.

First, the north torana:



Northern torana

Here you see a close-up of the sculptural program depicting stories from the life of the Buddha.

Here's another image of the eastern torana:



Eastern torana

Finally, a closeup of the western torana:



Western torana



SUMMARY

The unique characteristics of the Great Stupa at Sanchi make this structure an important work of art. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of the Great Stupa at Sanchi**.

The Buddha was important to the stupa, as these structures were built to hold Buddhist sacred physical objects, or relics. Elaborate sculpture depicting stories from the life of the Buddha covers the gates, or **the toranas**.

Finally, you explored various diagrams, including a **diagram of the elements, overhead diagram, and diagrams of the harmika and toranas**.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Circumambulation

The act of circling around a sacred object or deity object.

Harmika

A small platform with a railing located at the top of a stupa.

Mandala

A concentric diagram with spiritual and ritual importance in Buddhism and Hinduism.

Stupa

A sacred spot in memory of Buddha or a saint designated by a mound of earth or other materials.

Torana (gate)

In Hindu and Buddhist architecture, a type of gateway.

Yasti

Symbolizes the universe, a circular disk positioned on top of the dome of the stupa.