

Ashoka's Resilience: The Sacred Buddhist Iconography in Sanchi Stupa

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Abstract: *The Sanchi Stupa stands as a profound testament to the early Buddhist tradition, encapsulating religious, artistic, and philosophical themes within its architectural and iconographic framework. Originally commissioned by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, the monument underwent subsequent expansions under the Shunga and Satavahana dynasties. This stupa adheres to the aniconic tradition, wherein the Buddha is represented through sacred symbols rather than anthropomorphic imagery. Central motifs, including the Bodhi tree, Dharmachakra, and empty throne, serve as visual metaphors for enlightenment and the Buddha's spiritual presence. The elaborately carved toranas depict Jataka narratives and significant moments from the Buddha's life, reinforcing core Buddhist virtues. The architectural elements, such as the harmika and chhatra, symbolize the cosmological aspirations of Buddhist practice. At the same time, the integration of Indigenous deities like yakṣas and yakṣīs reflects the religion's adaptive syncretism. Through its intricate artistry and doctrinal representations, the Sanchi Stupa emerges as a vital conduit for understanding early Buddhist thought, illustrating the interplay between religious devotion, artistic expression, and cultural exchange in ancient India.*

Keywords: *Ashoka, Iconography, Resilience, Sacred Buddhist, Sanchi Stupa*

I. INTRODUCTION

The historical legacy of Ashoka, the third emperor of the Maurya Empire, has been marked by a significant transformation from military conquest to moral and philosophical leadership. Following the devastating Kalinga War, Ashoka's adoption of Buddhism and his propagation of its principles through his Dhamma edicts exemplified his profound shift towards compassion, non-violence, and governance guided by spiritual ideals. One of the most enduring symbols of this transformation is the Sanchi Stupa, a monumental Buddhist structure commissioned under Ashoka's rule (Goyal, 1989, pp. 112-115) [1]. This article explores the resilience of Ashoka's philosophical commitment, as reflected in the sacred iconography of the Sanchi Stupa. By examining the symbolism embedded in the stupa's architecture, it is time to shed light on Ashoka's long-lasting influence on Indian society and Buddhist thought.

Ashoka's reign (268-232 BCE) is often regarded as a turning point in the history of Indian civilization. Before his conversion to Buddhism, Ashoka's rule was marked by military expansion, culminating in the brutal conquest of Kalinga. The war's profound impact on Ashoka's conscience led to a remarkable shift in his personal and political philosophy. Turning away from violence, Ashoka embraced the teachings of the Buddha and dedicated himself to the spread of Buddhism throughout his empire. His Dhamma edicts, inscribed on pillars and rocks across the subcontinent, reflect his commitment to values such as compassion, truth, and religious tolerance. These principles were the foundation of his governance and a guiding force for his support of Buddhist institutions.

Among the most significant monuments associated with Ashoka is the Sanchi Stupa, located in central India. The stupa, originally built during Ashoka's reign, serves as an important symbol of his patronage of Buddhism. The structure, which houses relics of the Buddha, is renowned for its architectural complexity and the rich Buddhist iconography it contains. The stupa's *toranas* (gateways) are particularly notable for their symbolic representation of key events in the life of the Buddha, encapsulating the core teachings of Buddhism that Ashoka sought to promote throughout his empire (Aziz, 1993, pp. 74-78) [2].

Despite the wealth of scholarship on Ashoka's reign and the iconography of the Sanchi Stupa, critical gaps in the literature warrant further examination. To begin with, Goyal's work emphasizes Ashoka's political and spiritual transformation but fails to explore the psychological factors that might have influenced his shift from a warrior king to a Buddhist patron. Goyal primarily focuses on Ashoka's edicts without considering the emotional resilience behind his dramatic change in philosophy (Goyal, 1989, pp. 105-112) [1]. What's more, Aziz offers valuable insights into the architectural significance of the Sanchi Stupa but overlooks its long-term cultural and social impact, particularly concerning its influence on Buddhist practices and traditions in subsequent centuries (Aziz, 1993, pp. 68-78) [2]. At long last, Thapar's analysis of Ashoka's Dhamma edicts does not delve into how these edicts might correlate with the visual iconography at the Sanchi Stupa, missing an opportunity to explore how the emperor's written moral directives might have been symbolically reinforced through the stupa's design (Thapar, 1997, pp. 89-92) [3]. These gaps in the literature highlight the need for a more integrated analysis of Ashoka's emotional resilience, the enduring influence of the Sanchi Stupa, and the connection between his written and visual legacies.

The objective of this article, therefore, is to explore these dimensions by analyzing the sacred iconography of the Sanchi Stupa to uncover the lasting resilience of Ashoka's leadership and the symbiotic relationship between his edicts and the Buddhist symbols at the stupa. By analyzing Sanchi Stupa's iconography, it is possible to better understand how Ashoka's reign continues to inform contemporary debates on governance, ethical leadership, and the role of religion in shaping social structures. As such, the article not only addresses the historical significance of Ashoka and the Sanchi Stupa but also contributes to ongoing discussions about cultural resilience, spiritual continuity, and the enduring relevance of Ashoka's vision in today's world.

II. THE TESTAMENT OF THE SANCHI STUPA

The Sanchi Stupa stands as a monumental testament to the Buddhist ethos, reflecting Emperor Ashoka's profound commitment to the dissemination of Dhamma across the Indian subcontinent. It is not merely an architectural marvel but a tangible representation of Ashoka's spiritual transformation from a warrior king to a devout patron of Buddhism. The establishment of this sacred structure aligns with Ashoka's broader efforts to institutionalize Buddhist principles, advocating for non-violence, compassion, and righteous governance (Thapar, 1997, p. 87). The inscriptions found at Sanchi, along with Ashokan edicts elsewhere, affirm his mission to integrate Buddhist moral precepts into the fabric of daily life and statecraft (Thapar, 1997, p. 92) [3].

Beyond Ashoka's patronage, the continued embellishment of the stupa by subsequent rulers underscores its enduring religious significance. The Shunga and Satavahana dynasties, by expanding and enhancing the monument, reinforced their allegiance to Buddhism while adapting its artistic and iconographic elements to evolving cultural contexts. The richly adorned *toranas* and carved medallions illustrate a transition in artistic expression, highlighting the syncretic nature of Buddhist art that absorbed indigenous aesthetic traditions (Huntington, 1985, p. 210) [4].

Furthermore, the Sanchi Stupa's function extended beyond its architectural grandeur; it served as a focal point for Buddhist ritual practices and pilgrimage. Devotees circumambulated the stupa in meditative reverence, engaging in a sacred act that mirrored the path to enlightenment. The ritual movement around the stupa symbolized a journey toward liberation from *samsāra*, reinforcing the monument's role as a didactic and spiritual landmark (Thapar, 1997, p. 98) [3].

Through its enduring presence, the Sanchi Stupa remains a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Buddhist ideology. It embodies the convergence of imperial patronage, religious devotion, and artistic evolution, making it one of the most significant heritage sites of the ancient world. Even today, the monument

continues to inspire scholars, practitioners, and historians, serving as a bridge between past and present Buddhist traditions.

III. THE SACRED BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY IN SANCHI STUPA

The Sanchi Stupa stands as one of the most revered monuments in Buddhist history, embodying the profound spiritual, philosophical, and artistic traditions of early Buddhism. Constructed under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE and later expanded by the Shunga and Satavahana dynasties, the stupa represents an enduring symbol of Dhamma (righteous law) through its intricate iconographic program (Marshall, 1982, p. 12) [5]. Ashoka, in his efforts to propagate Buddhism or the law of piety, commissioned numerous stupas and pillars, embedding his imperial vision into Buddhist architecture (Smith, 1920, p. 107) [6]. Unlike later Mahayana Buddhist sites that introduced anthropomorphic depictions of the Buddha, the Sanchi Stupa adheres to the aniconic tradition, where the Buddha is represented through symbols rather than direct human imagery (Dehejia, 2021, p. 48) [7]. These sacred visual elements not only narrate the Buddha's life and teachings but also reinforce the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhism through artistic abstraction.

3.1 Aniconism in Early Buddhist Art

The artistic program of the Sanchi Stupa follows a strict aniconic tradition, reflecting the Theravāda Buddhist perspective, which refrained from depicting the Buddha in human form (Coomaraswamy, 1935, p. 29) [8]. Instead, sacred symbols such as the Bodhi tree, the *Dharmachakra* (Wheel of Dharma), the empty throne, and the stupa itself were used to represent his presence and teachings. The Bodhi tree signifies the site of the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodhi Gaya, serving as a focal point of devotion (Huntington, 1985, p. 157) [4]. The *Dharmachakra*, commonly seen on the stupa's *toranas*, symbolizes the Buddha's First Sermon at Sarnath, marking the commencement of his teachings (Behl, 1998, p. 89) [9]. The empty throne, often depicted beneath the Bodhi tree or within a shrine, conveys the transcendental nature of the Buddha, emphasizing his spiritual rather than physical presence (Brown, 2018, p. 122) [10].

This emphasis on abstraction aligns with the Buddhist doctrine of non-attachment, discouraging idol worship and reinforcing the idea that enlightenment transcends material existence. By using symbolic representations rather than human likenesses, Sanchi's iconography encourages meditative contemplation and fosters a deeper understanding of the Buddha's path beyond mere visual recognition.

3.2 The Sacred Symbolism of the *Toranas*

One of the most striking features of the Sanchi Stupa is its four elaborately carved *toranas*, or gateways, which serve as both ritual entrances and narrative panels (Asher, 2003, p. 101) [11]. These gateways, oriented in the four cardinal directions, depict *Jataka* tales—stories of the Buddha's previous lives—emphasizing moral virtues such as compassion, wisdom, and self-sacrifice (Huntington, 1985, p. 161) [4]. The carvings also illustrate significant events from the Buddha's final life, including his departure from the palace (*Mahabhinishkramana*), the miracle of *Sravasti*, and his *parinirvana* (final liberation) (Marshall, 1982, p. 28) [5].

The *toranas* are also adorned with auspicious motifs such as elephants, lions, and lotus flowers, each carrying symbolic significance. The elephants, often shown in the context of the Buddha's conception, represent mental strength and purity, while lions symbolize the Buddha's royal lineage and the power of his teachings, often referred to as the "lion's roar" (*simhanāda*) (Behl, 1998, p. 95) [9]. The lotus, emerging untainted from muddy waters, signifies spiritual purity and the potential for enlightenment despite worldly suffering (Coomaraswamy, 1965, p. 83) [12].

The structural placement of the *toranas* at the entrances of the stupa complex suggests their role in guiding devotees both physically and spiritually. As practitioners circumambulate the stupa, the narrative reliefs serve as visual scriptures, imparting ethical lessons and reinforcing the spiritual significance of the site.

3.3 The *Harmika* and the *Chhatra*: Celestial Connections

At the summit of the Sanchi Stupa lies the *harmika*, a square railing that encloses the sacred relic chamber (Asher, 2003, p. 104) [11]. This structure signifies the Buddhist *parinirvana*, denoting the Buddha's ultimate liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*) (Dehejia, 2021, p. 49) [7]. Above the *harmika* stands the *chhatra*, a triple-tiered umbrella that embodies the Three Jewels (*Triratna*) of Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha (monastic community) (Brown, 2018, p. 130) [10]. The vertical

progression of the *chhatra* represents spiritual ascension, guiding devotees towards higher states of consciousness.

These architectural elements were not merely ornamental but carried deep theological implications, aligning the monument with Buddhist cosmology. The placement of the *harmika* and *chhatra* at the highest point of the stupa underscores the transcendental aspirations of Buddhist practice, directing the devotee's gaze towards enlightenment.

3.4 *Yakshas, Yakshis*, and Celestial Beings

The iconographic program of Sanchi also incorporates pre-Buddhist Indigenous deities such as yakshas (male nature spirits) and *yakshis* (female fertility deities), which were later assimilated into Buddhist mythology (Huntington, 1985, p. 173) [4]. The depiction of the *yakshi* on the eastern *torana*, portrayed as a voluptuous woman grasping a tree branch, is a well-known motif in Indian art, signifying fertility, prosperity, and auspiciousness (Behl, 1998, p. 102) [9]. These figures serve a dual function: while rooted in local traditions, they also symbolize the benevolent forces protecting the Dhamma and ensuring its prosperity.

3.5 Ritualistic and Pilgrimage Significance

The Sanchi Stupa stands as a profound center of Buddhist devotion, embodying its function as a sacred site for meditation and ritualistic worship. As a stupa, it serves not only as a reliquary for enshrined sacred remains but also as a focal point for spiritual engagement, allowing devotees to cultivate *samādhi* (meditative absorption) in proximity to the Buddha's relics (Strong, 2004, p. 45) [13]. The site's sanctity is further reinforced by the intricate narrative reliefs adorning the *toranas*, which visually instruct pilgrims on Buddhist cosmology and moral teachings (Dehejia, 1972, p. 89) [14].

Pilgrims visiting Sanchi undertake various devotional practices, including offering flowers, incense, and prayers, signifying their reverence and commitment to the dhamma. The stupa's design—featuring concentric pathways and an elevated dome—encourages meditative contemplation, providing a space for spiritual introspection that aligns with Buddhist principles of impermanence and liberation (Snodgrass, 1985, p. 156) [15]. This sacred structure, therefore, functions as both a physical and metaphysical bridge, guiding practitioners toward deeper levels of faith and understanding.

One of the most integral forms of ritual engagement at Sanchi is *pradakshina* (circumambulation), a devotional act performed by both monastic and lay practitioners. Pilgrims walk in a clockwise direction around the stupa, a movement symbolizing the path toward enlightenment and the ever-turning *dharmachakra* (Gombrich, 1988, p. 112) [16]. This practice, deeply rooted in early Buddhist traditions, signifies an act of veneration while also reinforcing the cosmic order upheld by Buddhist teachings (Huntington, 1985, p. 210) [4].

IV. THE INTERPLAY OF ART AND DOCTRINE IN SANCHI

The iconography of the Sanchi Stupa reflects not only the artistic excellence of early Buddhist traditions but also the doctrinal underpinnings that shaped its visual culture. The use of aniconic symbols rather than direct human representations of the Buddha aligns with the Theravāda emphasis on non-attachment and the impermanence of material existence. This artistic restraint underscores the Buddhist philosophical view that the ultimate goal of practice is liberation from *samsara* rather than devotion to a physical form (Dehejia, 2021, pp. 45-47) [7].

Furthermore, the narrative reliefs of the *toranas* play a crucial role in disseminating Buddhist teachings. By illustrating episodes from the Jatakas and the Buddha's final life, these carvings function as visual scriptures that engage devotees through storytelling. This visual transmission of Dhamma ensured accessibility even for those who were illiterate, thus expanding the reach of Buddhist teachings beyond monastic communities (Marshall, 1918, pp. 72-74) [5].

The inclusion of pre-Buddhist elements, such as yakshas and fertility motifs, suggests a deliberate strategy of religious assimilation. By integrating local beliefs and deities, Buddhism was able to establish itself within diverse cultural landscapes while maintaining its core ethical and philosophical principles. This syncretic approach facilitated the widespread acceptance of Buddhism in India and beyond (Coomaraswamy, 1965, pp. 98-100) [12].

Moreover, the architectural alignment of the Sanchi Stupa with Buddhist cosmology reinforces its function as a sacred space that transcends mere artistic expression. The vertical symbolism of the *harmika* and *chhatra* echoes Buddhist soteriology, guiding practitioners toward higher spiritual realizations. The stupa,

therefore, becomes both a site of devotion and an instrument of enlightenment, encapsulating the synthesis of form and philosophy in Buddhist art.

Ultimately, the Sanchi Stupa exemplifies how Buddhist art serves a didactic and devotional purpose. Its sacred imagery provides insight into early Buddhist theological perspectives and highlights the dynamic interplay between doctrine, artistic expression, and cultural adaptation. The monument remains a testament to the enduring influence of Buddhist iconography in shaping spiritual and artistic traditions across Asia.

V. CONCLUSION

The Sanchi Stupa stands as a profound testament to the confluence of religious devotion, artistic innovation, and Buddhist philosophical thought. Its sacred iconography, deeply rooted in the aniconic tradition, reflects a sophisticated visual language that conveys the Buddha's teachings through symbolic abstraction. The monument's architectural elements and intricate reliefs embody the principles of Dhamma, guiding practitioners toward spiritual enlightenment and reinforcing Buddhist ethical ideals. The continued veneration and preservation of the Sanchi Stupa underscore its historical and spiritual significance across generations. Through the harmonious integration of indigenous artistic elements and Buddhist doctrine, the stupa has remained a focal point of pilgrimage and scholarly inquiry. Its enduring presence attests to the adaptability and resilience of Buddhist traditions, demonstrating the lasting impact of Ashoka's vision in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of South Asia. As the Buddha declared in verse 103: "*One who conquers himself is greater than another who conquers a thousand times a thousand men on the battlefield*" [17].

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