

A stupa at the Hermitage of the Awakened Heart

His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche told Lama Shenpen when she visited his monastery in Nepal in the late 1980s that she and Rigdzin Shikpo should build a stupa or purpose built temple in NW Wales in an area that included the whole of Snowdonia, Anglesey and the Llyn Peninsula. In order to fulfil HHoliness's vision and with Khenpo Rinpoche and Rigdzin Shikpo Rinpoche's encouragement and blessing, Lama Shenpen has laid the ground for constructing a small stupa (2.4m high) in the garden of the Hermitage, the fortress of the Awakened Heart (named by Khenpo Tsutrim Gyamtso Rinpoche in 2002). The senior student body and Trustees of the Shrimala Trust have adopted this vision as their own and are already considering how to secure the long term future of the stupa. The intention and aspiration as voiced by HH Khyentse Rinpoche is that it will endure for hundreds of years for the benefit of all beings.

What is a stupa?

Essentially the stupa derives from the ancient idea of a burial mound. World-wide, and in this part of Britain in particular, one finds traces of the ancient tradition of burial mounds such as cromlechs of which there are four within a few miles of the Hermitage.

In the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, when the Buddha was about to pass away, he was asked what should be done with his remains. He said that they should be kept in a special structure, and he demonstrated its form by folding his robe into a square and putting his begging bowl upside-down on it, using his staff to represent the central pillar.

The exact shape has evolved in different cultures but essentially the structure is always the same.

In the Tibetan tradition there are a number of different kinds of stupas, eight of which symbolise the different events in the Buddha's life. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche directed us to build the kind of stupa that commemorates the Buddha's Enlightenment with an image of Tara the female embodiment of compassion gazing out from within it.

Symbolism of the stupa

The spire is the top of the central pillar of the stupa, representing the ancient idea of the world axis, the tree of life, marking and arising from the central point of the mandala. This is the most essential element of the symbolism of the stupa, making that very place where it stands the centre of the Universe, the dimensionless point that is both its origin and the beginning of our path to Enlightenment. The square base of the stupa is stepped and symbolises the facets and stages in the development of insight. Each facet protects the sacred space in which the path to Enlightenment can Awaken in us. The dome (which in Tibetan stupas is usually vase shaped) is like a womb, containing the essence of the Buddha. This is where the relics of the Buddha or of realised beings are kept, connecting us to the full Awakening of the Buddha's qualities within us and all those who encounter the stupa in any way. Seeing, touching, contributing to the building or rituals connected to the stupa, even if done inadvertently draws us into its sphere of influence. As a sacred place it is acting as a gateway into the mandala or world of Awakening – the world that is within us needing to be unveiled.

The top of the spire symbolises the stages of the Bodhisattva path as our powers to help others

increases and we approach complete and perfect Awakening at the tip of the spire where it merges into the undifferentiated vastness of space the symbol of the Totality of Being.

Relics of Awakened beings

We have at the Hermitage many holy relics that we use to put into Buddha images and will use to put into the Stupa. Relics can be anything from fragments of bone, hair, robes, shroud and so on to the very special ringsil that are produced when realised beings are cremated. Simply to come into the presence of such sacred relics can have a profound effect on one's state of mind and even on one's body. At the Hermitage we already have relics of Shakyamuni Buddha, HH Dilgo Khyentse, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the 16th Karmapa, Bokar Rinpoche, some robe of Jowo Rinpoche in Tibet just to mention a few. Furthermore Lama Phuntsok has promised to give us relics from all the teachers of the lineage.

The idea here is that anything that belonged to the mandala or world of an Awakened being has the adhistana or power to draw us into that mandala due to the interpenetration of all worlds and the energy exchange at the interface between interpenetrating worlds when they touch or come into each other's presence in a strong way.

What is the use of a stupa?

The stupa acts as a focus or fulchram that generates spiritual energy that can protect and benefit all who come within its sphere of influence. This spiritual energy is generated through the principle of interpenetration which is the true nature of the Universe. This is outside of space and time as we usually conceive of it. The energy or power emanating from the reality symbolised by the stupa is called adhistana or blessing power and is harnessed through the power of the transmission lineage and skilfully conducted rituals. The prayers or pranidhanas of all those involved in the construction and consecration of the stupa determine the intensity of its power and effectiveness.

Once the stupa is built and consecrated it can be used as a focus for our practice whether we are in its immediate presence or not.

Approaching it, bowing to it, prostrating, circumambulating it, making offerings such as flowers, gold leaf, lights, incense, perfume, prayer flags and so on brings spiritual benefit, punya and purification, removing obstacles and helping to gather the conditions for well-being and progress on the path. This is augmented by making prayers and pranidhanas or meditating in its presence or by simply having it in mind.

A place for the ashes of loved ones

We will be building a structure for holding the ashes of loved ones that will be placed not in the stupa, but nearby as an auspicious connection for those who have died and as a way of honouring their remains.

Stages of the project

Construction of the stupa will begin by assembling the three or four concrete pieces that will make up the body of the stupa off site, in April. We cannot prepare the site until Lama Phuntsok comes in late September and tells us that the site we have chosen is suitable. Once that is done, the ground will be prepared and the appropriate rituals performed. Then the concrete pieces will be

manouvered into place ready for the rituals for the next few stages. The final stage is the installing of the axis pole which will have been prepared for us with all the appropriate rituals in Nepal ahead of time.

Lama Phuntsok is a Kagyu Lama and colleague of Khenpo Rinpoche and is already preparing the ritual objects to be put into the stupa and will come, probably in September to do the rituals for its consecration. He did the same for the Stupa in Samye Ling in Scotland and will be doing the same for the stupa at Karma Dechen ling near Haye-on-Wye on the same visit as when he does ours.

For more information about stupas see *The Symbolism of the Stupa* by Adrian Snodgrass.

How you can get involved

There are various ways you can get involved.

- Make a donation for the stupa project
- Make a donation on behalf of a loved one and dedicate the punya for them
- Give gold, silver ornaments and jewels to put into the stupa to enrich and empower it
- Make regular donations to the Hermitage to help ensure there is always someone there to take care of the stupa
- Help with the Lamas' visit in September
- Help with landscaping and creating a walk way and garden around the stupa after it has been constructed
- Help with constructing the house for people's ashes
- Help with installing prayer wheels
- Offer to manage parts of the project
- Help at the Hermitage receiving volunteers and visitors at the time of the Lamas visit

For more information contact the Office on office@ahs.org.uk.