

# RELIC IN MAHAYANA BUDDHISM AT MUSEUM OF NAGARJUNA KONDA

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In various religions, a relic usually consists of the physical remains of a saint or the personal effects of the saint or venerated person preserved for purposes of veneration as a tangible memorial. Relics are an important aspect of some forms of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Shamanism and many other religions. Relic derives from the Latin reliquiae, meaning "remains", and a form of the Latin verb reliquary, to "leave behind, or abandon". A reliquary is a shrine that houses one or more religious relics. As with the relics of Theses, the bones were sometimes described in literary sources as gigantic, an indication of the hero's "larger than life" status. Because of their reported size, it was been conjectured that such bones were those of Prehistoric creatures, the startling discovery of which may have prompted the sanctifying of the site. A stupa is a building created specifically for the relics. Many Buddhist temples have stupas and historically, the placement of relics in a stupa often became the initial structure around which the whole temple would be based. Today, many stupas also hold the ashes or Ringsel of prominent/respected Buddhists who was cremated. The Andhras embraced Buddhism long before that era of Asoka and as Prof. K.R.Subramaniam has stated in his excellence monograph, Buddhist Remains in Andhra, "it cannot be doubted that Andhra Buddhism was pre-Asokan." Some relics believed to be original remains of the body of the Buddha still survive, including the much-revered Sacred Relics of the tooth of Buddha in Sri Lanka.

**Key words:** Stupa, Ringsel, Nagarjuna, Andhra, Remains, larger than life, Buddhist.

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In Buddhism, relics of the Buddha and various sages are venerated. After the Buddha's death, his remains were divided into eight portions. Afterward, these relics were enshrined in stupas wherever Buddhism was spread.

The Buddha's relics are considered to show people that enlightenment is possible, to remind them that the Buddha was a real person, and to also promote good virtue. Though the feet of Gautama, the Buddha never touched the soil of Andhra, it was in this youngest State of the Republic of India that Buddhist art and sculpture, especially the latter, had its finest flowering. The Andhras embraced Buddhism long before that era of Asoka and as Prof. K.R.Subramaniam has stated in his excellence monograph, Buddhist Remains in Andhra, "it cannot be doubted that Andhra Buddhism was pre-Asokan." Some relics believed to be original remains of the body of the Buddha still survive, including the much-revered Sacred Relics of the tooth of Buddha in Sri Lanka.

"Nagarjunakonda (meaning Nagarjuna Hill in Telugu) is a historical Buddhist town, now an island located near Nagarjuna Sagar in Nalgonda district in the Indian state of Telangana. It was formed when a hill was submerged in the waters of the Nagarjuna Sagar Dam, constructed in the 1960s. It is one of India's richest Buddhist sites, known in the ancient times as Sri Parvata. It now lies almost entirely under the Nagarjunasagar Dam. It is named after Nagarjuna, a southern Indian master of Mahayana Buddhism who lived in the 2nd century AD, who is believed to have been responsible for the Buddhist activity in the area. The site was once the location of many Buddhist universities and monasteries, attracting students from as far as China, Gandhara, Bengal and Sri Lanka.

"During the 3rd–4th centuries AD, Nagarjunakonda, 150 km south of Hyderabad, was the capital of the Ikshvaku rulers. The ancient site occupied an area of about 23 sq.km in a valley on the banks of Krishna River. A large number of monasteries and shrines were erected to serve the needs of different Buddhist sects. Most of the excavated remains were submerged under the enormous reservoir created by the Dam built in the nineteen sixties on the Krishna River. A few monuments were reconstructed on a hilltop, which became an island in the reservoir.

At Nagarjunakonda the reconstructed stupas have circular brick or rubble walls. The walls have cladding of limestone slabs or plaster. The **Simha Vihara** has two Chaitya halls, one encircling a Buddha image. The Chaitya Halls and monasteries had limestone columns set in to brick or stone walls. However only the lower portions including the pavement slabs and access steps survive. Nagarjunakonda also has remains of some

Hindu shrines. The island has an archaeological museum rich in sculptures mainly from the 3rd –4th century AD and also a few pieces from much later periods.

Originally his ashes were to go only to the Shakya clan, to which Buddha belonged; however, six clans and a king, demanded the body relics. To avoid fighting, a Brahmin Drona divided the relics into ten portions, eight from the body relics, one from the ashes of Buddha's cremation pyre and one from the pot used to divide the relics, which he kept for himself. After The Buddha's Parinibbāna, his relics were enshrined and worshipped in stupas by the royals of eight countries: to Ajatasattu, king of Magadha; to the Licchavis of Vaishali; to the Sakyas of Kapilavastu; to the Bulis of Allakappa; to the Koliyas of Ramagrama; to the Brahmin of Vethadipa; to the Mallas of Pava; and to the Mallas of Kushinagar.

A Stupa is a monument specifically to house such relics. Often they were enclosed in caskets (such as the Kanishka casket or the Bimaran vasket).

It is one of India's richest Buddhist sites and now it lies in the backwaters of Nagarjuna Sagar Dam. Nagarjuna Konda was once the capital of Ikshvaku Kingdom and was called Vijayapuri. It was named after Acharya Nagarjuna, a renowned Buddhist scholar, philosopher who lived here in the 2nd century AD and composed the initial sutras of Mahayana Buddhism. The revered Buddhist monk was heading the community of Buddhist priests for nearly 60 years in the 2nd century. He found the Madhyamika School which studied and developed the teaching of Mahayana Buddhism. The relics were later dug up by Ashoka, and used the relics (said to have been divided into 84,000 portions) and had stupas built over them throughout the region he rules. Many of the remains were taken to other countries. The Ashokavadana narrates how Ashoka redistributed Buddha's relics across 84,000 stupas, with the distribution of the relics and construction of the stupas performed by Yakshas.

When the Chinese pilgrims Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang visited India centuries later, they reported most of ancient sites were in ruin.

The *Lokapannatti* (11th/12th century) tells the story of King Ajatashatru of Magadha who gathered the Buddha's relics and hid them in an underground stupa. The Buddha's relics were protected by spirit-powered mechanical robots (bhuta vahana yanta) from the kingdom of Roma visaya until they were disarmed by King Ashoka.

The Mahaparinirvana sutra says that of the Buddha's four eye teeth (canines), one was worshipped in Indra's Heaven, the second in the city of Gandhara, the third in Kalinga, and the fourth in Ramagrama by the king of the Nagas. Annually in Sri Lanka and China, tooth relics would be paraded through the streets. In the past relics have had the legal right to own property; and the destruction of stupas containing relics was a capital crime viewed as murder of a living person. A southeast Asian tradition says that after his parinirvana the gods

distributed the Buddha's 800,000 body and 900,000 head hairs throughout the universe. In Theravada according to the 5th century Buddhaghosa possessing relics was one of the criteria in Theravada for what constituted a proper monastery. The adventures of many relics are said to have been foretold by Buddha, as they spread the dharma and gave legitimacy to rulers. It is said all the Buddha's relics will one day gather at the Bodhi tree where he attained enlightenment and will then form his body sitting cross legged and performing the twin miracle. It is said the disappearance of the relics at this point will signal the coming of Maitreya Buddha. In the Nandimitravadana translated by Xuanzang it is said that the Buddha's relics will be brought to parinirvana by sixteen great arhats and enshrined in a great stupa. That stupa will then be worshipped until it sinks into the earth down to the golden wheel underlying the universe. The relics are not destroyed by fire in this version but placed in a final reliquary deep within the earth, perhaps to appear again. Previous incarnations of the Buddha also left relics; in the Buddhavamsa it mentions that the Sobhita, Paduma, Sumedha, Atthadassi, Phussa, Vessabhu, and Konagamana buddhas have had their relics dispersed. The relics of Buddha's disciples like Sariputta and Maugglayana, were also preserved enshrined in stupas (as in Sanchi).

The segment called Stupa vanam displays miniature stupas (replicas) from the Buddhist sites of India and South-East Asian countries. The stupas evolved from the style of the old funeral mounds of India and influenced the architecture of the domes of West Asia, particularly Persia. While the Indian Stupas are budbudha or bubble-shaped, they evolved in different architectural styles in other Buddhist countries.

An attempt is made to present the replicas of the stupas of different parts of India - Sanchi, Sarnath, Ajanta, Karle and Manikyala and other countries. Replicas of the stupas from Top Darra (North western Frontier), Mirpur-Khas (Pakistan), Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka), Phra Pathom Chedi (Thailand), Chorten (Tibet), Boudhanath (Nepal), Shwedagon (Myanmar) and Pagoda (China) are built in their styles of architecture for the benefit of the visitors. This park is still developing and it is yet to create replicas of great monuments like the Borobodur of Indonesia, Japan etc.

According to Buddhist belief, Bodhisattva goes through several lives practicing ten paramis or perfections before he is finally born as Siddhartha, attains enlightenment and becomes a Buddha. These stories about the previous births of Bodhisattva are illustrated in 547 jatakas. The Buddha himself referred to the jatakas during while giving sermons at Shravasti, Vaishali, Rajagriha and other places of his ministry. The practice of ten perfections (dasaparamita) required for the Buddhahood are exalted in the jataka stories. The perfections are Generosity (Dana), Virtue (Sila), Patience (kshanti), Courage (Virya) Concentration (Dhyana), Wisdom (Prajna), Renunciation (tyaga), Truth (satya), Loving kindness (karuna) and Equanimity (samata). Also described in the well known Maha Hamsa Jataka Story is the principle of right governance or dasa rajadharma.

The jataka stories exemplified by the lives of the Bodhisattva provide provide guidance to practicing Buddhists in everyday living. Jataka stories have been an integral part of Buddhist Culture. It is customary for practicing Buddhists to listen to the monks narrating the Jataka stories on full-moon days. They are very popular in India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Nepal and Combodia and other Buddhist countries.

The Jatakas illustrated in the park, include Dipankara, Kattahari, Matakabatta, Nalapana, Vanarindha, Rsya Sringa, Sasa, Ahigundika, Dighitkosala, Kalinga, Ghata Panditha, Kunala, Kakati, Mahapaduma, Maha Hamsa, Sibi, Matanga, Sankhapala, Mahasuttasoma, Vidurapanditha, Nigrodhamiga, Chaddanta, Kurma Avadana, Mandhata, Mahakapi, Champeya, Syama, Maha Ummagga, Ashwamukhi, Dasaratha, Kavikumara, Suvarna Prabhasa (Mora), Losaka, Matsya, Kurungamirga, Mahisa, Timingala, Hasti, Simhalavadana and Vessantara.

Major events from the life of the Buddha are displayed in Buddhacharita Vanam - the birth of the Siddhartha in Lumbini, Maha parinirvana or the Great Departure of Siddhartha, Sambodhi or Enlightenment, Dharmachakra pravartana or the turning of the wheel of the Dharma or preaching the first sermon and The Great Extinction or Mahaparinirvana. Buddhapada with asthamangala symbols carved in green lime stone is also displayed at the entrance of the park. All the five major events are represented in free-standing bronzes. The legend surrounding the birth of Siddhartha depicts Mayadevi under the sal tree and the just born Siddhartha taking seven steps and declaring that this is his last birth! Mahabhinishkramana (Great Departure) depicts Siddhartha leaving the palace on the back of his horse, Kantaka. The sculpture of Samyak Sambodhi depicts the enlightenment of Siddhartha and his transformation into a Buddha. The Buddha is seated in dhyana mudra under the Bodhi (Pipal) tree at Buddhadhgaya. The Sculpture Dharmachakra Parvartana depicts Buddha seated in the deer park preaching the first sermon to the Pancha Vargiya Bhikkhus, the five seekers who were earlier associated with Sidhhartha in spiritual pursuit. The Sculpture of Mahaparinirvana depicts the Great Extinction of the Buddha. Buddha is seen in a reclining posture keeping his head on the right hand. The pedestal is depicted with the scenes of Subaddha (Last Disciple), the coffin, monks and the common folk of Kusinara where the event took place.

### **Buddhist Relics on Display in proposed Capital Amaravati of A.P.**

A collection of Buddhist relics previously stashed away at the Archaeological Museum in Amaravati—including items believed to be remains of the Buddha—has been placed on public display as part of activities to mark the foundation ceremony for the proposed new capital of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, held on 22 October. The ceremony was attended by a host of dignitaries, including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who laid the foundation stone.

The proposed state capital, which sits on the southern bank of the Krishna River, was a renowned center of Buddhist learning from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE. The historic site is home to the Amaravati stupa, now in ruins, which was built during the reign of the Indian emperor Ashoka (r. c. 268–232 BCE). Aiming to increase tourism in the region, the government of Andhra Pradesh plans to establish a “Monastery Boulevard” in Amaravati as an international hub of Buddhism where different Buddhist orders can build monasteries and temples, similar to Bodh Gaya in the northeastern Indian state of Bihar. Modi also hopes that Amaravati will become a model for the government’s initiative to develop 100 “smart cities” in India.

*Aymard, Orianne (2014).When a Goddess Dies: Worshipping Anandamayi after Her death . Oxford University Press.p. 71. ISBN 0199368635.*  
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