

## *The Licchavis, their Stupa, and its Relics*

### **Bhante Shravasti Dhammika**

After the Buddha died, the Mallas of Kusinārā organised an elaborate week-long funeral for him culminating in the cremation of his body. In the meantime, news of the Buddha's demise had been spreading, and representatives from several kingdoms, chiefdoms and clans began arriving in Kusinārā to claim the mortal remains. The Sakyans wanted them because, as their representative said: "The Tathāgata was the greatest of our clan". The envoy of the king of Magadha said that his master was entitled to the ashes because he was of the warrior caste and so was the Buddha. The Mallas, arguing from the standpoint of possession being nine-tenths of the law, said: "The Tathāgata attained final Nirvana in the precincts of our town, and we will not give up his bones". In all, eight claimants were involved in this unseemly dispute, the others being the Licchavis of Vesālī, the Buliyas of Allakappa, the Koliyas of Rāmagāma, the Mallas of Pāvā, and a mysterious brahmin from Vethādīpa, known only from this single reference in the Tipitaka. Given that the Buddha had spent much of his last two decades in Kosala and that its king, Pasadeni, was one of his most important patrons, it is curious that no representative from there was amongst the claimants.

A brahmin named Doṇa happened to be visiting Kusinārā and seeing the impasse he offered to arbitrate between the quarrelling parties. He addressed the assembled worthies, saying: "The Buddha's teaching is about patience, and it is not right that strife should come from sharing out the remains of the best of men. Let us all come together in harmony and peace and in a spirit of friendship divide the remains into eight". This appeal was accepted, probably reluctantly by some, and it was agreed that Doṇa should divide the remains according to what he thought fair. After the division, as a gesture of gratitude for his services, he was given the vessel in which the remains had been held and measured out. The division having been made to everyone's satisfaction, an envoy from the Moriya clan turned up and demanded a portion of the remains, and Doṇa came to the rescue again, suggesting that these latecomers be given the ashes from the funeral pyre. This was done, each recipient undertook to build a stupa over their share of the remains, and thus the first stupas came to be constructed.

This is the account of the Buddha's funeral and the events that followed it as related in the Tipitaka. But is it true and is there any material evidence to prove it, or at least prove parts of it?

In the last 150 years, archaeologists have been able to identify, with differing degrees of certainty, at least five of the original ten stupas. The stupa built by King Ajātasattu has been identified but it was built over and re-purposed several times in subsequent centuries so that little of the original now remains. The stupa built by the Sakyans in Kapilavatthu (modern Piprahwa) was excavated in 1898 and again in 1971-73 and yielded what are almost certainly genuine relics. There are several contenders for the stupas erected by Doṇa and the Koliyas or Rāmagāma although which of them is the original is still uncertain. However, the stupa erected by the Licchavis of Vesālī had been identified with certainty, carefully excavated and studied, and is available for all to see.

In the afterglow of the Buddha Jayanti of 1956, the Archaeological Survey of India was given generous funding by the Indian government to identify, excavate and preserve various sites associated with the Buddha, and one of the places targeted for this undertaking was Vesālī. The site of ancient city of Vesālī had been first identified by the archaeologist Alexander Cunningham in 1861 using the travel account of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who visited the place in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and left a detailed description of it. Various places among the ruins were excavated in 1902, 1904, 1912-13, 1950, and most importantly and thoroughly between 1958 and 1962 by the eminent archaeologists B. P. Sinha and S. R. Roy. A detailed account of their findings with charts, diagrams and photographs was published in 1969. Of the numerous finds Sinha and Roy made, the most significant was the stupa erected by the Licchavis shortly after the distribution of the Buddha's ashes.

It was found that the stupa was originally surprisingly modest, being only 26 ft. 6 in, a little more than 8 meters in diameter, made of earth, and with a platform for offerings at each of the four cardinal directions around it, of which only two still existed. Judging from the slope of the side of the stupa, its dome when complete would have been 11 ft. 4 in. or 3.4544 meters high. The stupa had been enlarged three times over the centuries. The first enlargement was made from brick and outside it was found fragments of polished Chunar sandstone usually associated with Mauryan period, which indicating that the earthen stupa enclosed by this enlargement must have been built before this time. On the western side of this enlargement was a breach indicating that someone had opened the stupa during the Mauryan period. This breach had been carefully cut and had extended to the center of the stupa and subsequently filled in with earth and in the filling was found a small, polished soapstone casket containing a small conch shell, glass beads, gold leaf, and some ash. The casket's lid had been cracked by the weight of the structure above it. The second enlargement, also made of brick, increased the stupa's diameter to 12.192 meters. The third and final enlargement seems to have been mainly to buttress the stupa. Sinha conjectured that the nearby Gandak River had at one time inundated

the surrounding area causing subsidence in the stupa and that the buttressing was meant to strengthen it and prevent it from collapsing.

As for dating, Sinha concluded that the first and original stupa dated from the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, i.e., around the time of the Buddha's death, the first enlargement from the Mauryan period, most likely during the reign of King Asoka (304-232 BCE), the second enlargement from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, and the third enlargement from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. These findings are quite remarkable because they fit well with what the Tipitaka tells us and even something of what Buddhist tradition says. The Licchavis received a one eighth share of the Buddha's ashes and in their city enshrined them within a stupa. As for the breach in the second enlargement, this would seem to be evidence for the tradition that King Asoka opened some of the original stupas to remove parts of the relics so they could be enshrined in the many new stupas he was building.

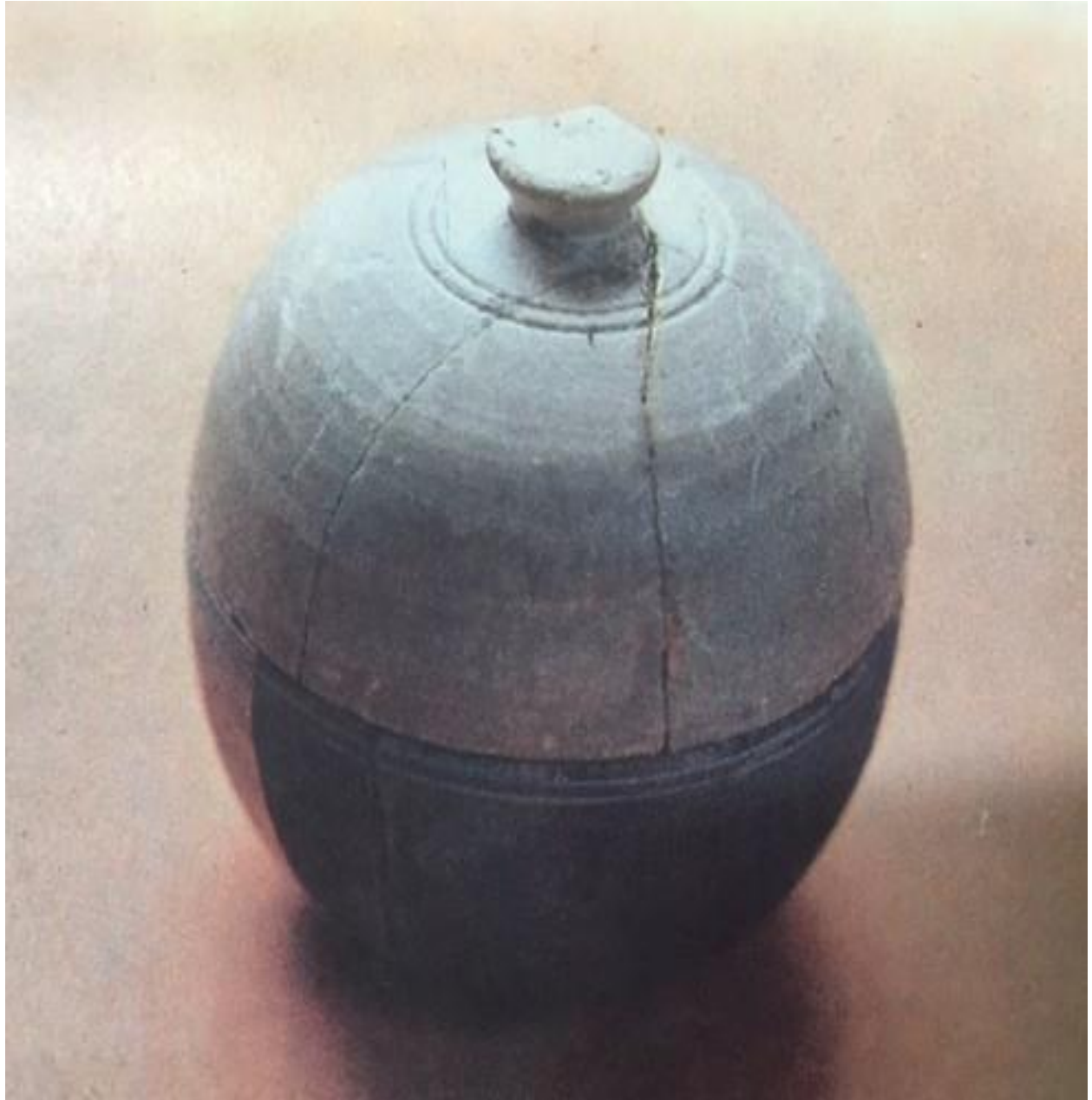
Some might be surprised to learn that one of the original stupas in Vesālī raised over the Buddha's ashes was of such a modest size and made only of earth, when they are familiar with the sometimes huge, spired and brick or cement stupas of today. But like many things, stupas started as very modest structures. The earliest reference to something like stupas is found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, a pre-Buddhist work, where they are called *śmanśāna*. It mentions the bones of kinsmen being buried under circular earthen mounds, partly to commemorate them but also to prevent their spirit from disturbing their family. The first Buddhists did not believe that the spirits of the dead could harass the living so they re-purposed these earthen mounds to preserve the material remains of the Buddha and provide a place where honor and respect for him could be expressed.

For decades the relics and the casket that held them remained in the storeroom of the Patna Museum, neglected and half forgotten. But as the economic importance of tourism, and particularly Buddhist pilgrimage, came to be realized things started to change in the 2000s. Despite the Patna Museum's outstanding collection of Buddhist artifacts, they were poorly displayed and lit, while some of the best pieces languished in storage. But last year, a major Rs.158 million refurbishing transformed the museum into a world class attraction. For Buddhists visiting the museum, the highlight of the collection is a stupa-shaped display case with the relic casket and the ashes it contains from the Licchavi's stupa.

*(1). The foundations of the Licchavi's stupa showing the three enlargements.*



(2). *The soapstone casket found inside the stupa.*



(3). *The casket and the Buddha's ashes in the Patna Museum today.*

