PHRA ČEDI
by
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No one visiting a Siamese monastery, popularly known as a wat, would fail to notice a certain structure, pyramidal in form with a slender tapering spire at the top. The structure is known in Siamese as a Čedi or a Phra Čedi. In one wat there may be just one Čedi of a fairly large size, or there may be several of them of varying sizes and decorative schemes. When we talk of a Phra Čedi, the first word Phra is just an honorific, meaning "exalted", from the Sanskrit vara. The honorific is usually prefixed to an object of veneration pertaining to religion or royalty. The second part, Čedi, is the Siamese equivalent of the Pāli cetiya and the Sanskrit caitya. This kind of a monument referred at first to the tumulus raised over the ashes of the dead. In Siam nowadays it just means a sacred monument or a reliquary. To understand the development of the Čedi one must go back to ancient times.

In one of the books of the Buddhist Scripture, the Dhammapada, there is the story of a disciple of the Lord Buddha who was gored to death by an ox. He was cremated and the Buddha commanded that a pile of earthwork be raised over his ashes, thereby constituting a tumulus, or Čedi. Such a custom of raising earthen mounds over the ashes of a saint was not unknown to Brahmans and Jains of olden times.

Scholars now distinguish such monuments as the Čedi in four categories, namely:

1. Phra DhatutČedi (Dhatucetiya in Pāli), containing what is supposed to have been the Buddha's own ashes;

2. Phra BoripokaČedi (Paribhogačetiya in Pāli), containing articles supposed to have been personally used by the Buddha, such as his begging bowl and robes. Under
this category is also included the four sacred sites in connection with the history of the life of the Buddha; namely, his birth-place at Kapilavastu, the place where he became enlightened (Bodhagaya), the place where he preached his first sermon (Sarnath) and the place where he died (Kusinara);

3. *Phra Dhammachedi* (Pāli, Dhammačetiya), the depository of his teaching or law;

4. *Phra Udesikachedi* (Pāli, Udesikačetiya), which takes the form of a reminder of religion, such as the image of the Buddha.

The first category, known also as a *Stūpa* in Sanskrit, or *Thūpa* in Pāli, is also called *sathāp* in Siamese. It is sometimes referred to in Siamese as *Phra Sathupcedi*. In Ceylon it is *āhātugabba*, which has been anglicized into *dagoba*. Curiously enough, there is the well-known word *pagoda*, meaning temple, shrine or *cedi*, which sounds somewhat similar.

In several of the bigger *wats* there is only one *cedi* of large proportions. This would be the *Phra Dhātuchedi*, of the first category. Usually the *wat* possessing such an important monument would be known as Wat Phra Mahādhatu, meaning the *wat* of the great reliquary of the Lord Buddha. It has been traditional for a royal city to have a Wat Phra Mahādhatu. Here in Bangkok there is a Wat Mahādhatu behind the National Library. Another one, a Wat Phra Sri Mahādhatu, built some fifteen years ago, is in the northern suburb of Bangkok, near the Donmuang aerodrome. At Lopburi there is also a Wat Mahādhatu to the west of the railway station. The towns of Ayudhya, Pisnulok and Sukhothai also have one each. This indicates that these towns have been at one time or another a capital city.
These ṭhri-monuments are fundamentally similar in structure though details in their decorations may differ. A ṭhri may be divided for analytical purposes into four parts, namely: the plinth, the dome-shaped structure called the bell, the platform and the spire. There are of course many styles of ṭhri in Siam and neighbouring countries, but those in Bangkok are mostly confined to the style known as the Ceylonese; and they are the ones described above.

If we compare this type of ṭhri with the well-known stūpa of Sāñci, we see at once that the Siamese type of ṭhri is obviously developed from it in that both have a simple round tumulus surrounded by a balustrade. This round tumulus has become the “bell” or dome-shaped structure of our ṭhri, which, by further architectural development may often take a rectangular form, with or without reduced angles or corners and other decorations. The balustrade becomes the plinth of our local type with many superimposed tiers ordained by traditions of architecture. The lowest tier is sometimes widened to form a terrace for circumambulation. Above the dome-shaped structure at the “neck of the bell” (नरः) is a small quadrangular platform called in Siamese banlang (Pāli pallāka) with a number of colonnades above it. This platform is characteristic of the Ceylonese style. The platform might have been a place where a symbol of the relic within was deposited. Above the platform we come to the slender tapering spire. The lower part of this latter section consists of circles diminishing in diameter, superimposed one upon the other, called in Siamese plong chanai (ปล้องข้าง). The word chanai is the name of a musical instrument of the hautboi kind with many circles round its body. Hence the above name. It is perhaps the same as the Malay suranai, a kind of a hautboi which is again to be found in Persia. These circles, or plong chanai, have no doubt been developed from the idea of tiered parasols diminishing in diameter as they rise to the top of the spire. Sometimes the circles take the shape of lotus flowers known in Siamese as the bua klum (บัวกลม), meaning lotus.
clusters. Above the circles is the phī, or plantain bud, so called on account of its shape. This again may be divided into the upper and lower phī with a round ball in between. At the culminating point of the upper phī is another round ball, called in Siamese yūd nam khāng (หมุนมนกิจ), or dewdrop. I am particular in describing the various parts of the cedi, for they are fundamentally similar to the spired roof of the King's Palace, which is called in Siamese prāsād, from the Sanskrit prāsād, a storeyed building.

The composition of a Phra Cedi may be compared with that of the śikhara of the Hindu temple. That part of the cedi called the bell would then correspond to the garbha, or chamber in the Hindu śikhara. In a large sized cedi there is of course a chamber inside the bell. The banlang, or platform, of a cedi is the devagriha, i.e., God's house, in the śikhara and the spire of a cedi is the actual śikhara, referring to the mountain peak on which gods in Hinduism are supposed to live. The dewdrop of a cedi is equivalent to the kalasa or kumbha in the Hindu śikhara, meaning a water-pot. I introduce the Hindu śikhara into my description of a cedi because some of the cedi and some of the prāsād of the royal palaces have conventional tops like the Hindu śikhara instead of the more common tapering slender spires. The Hindu śikhara is called in Siamese a prāng (ปราง) and in shape is like the cob of the Indian corn, a characteristic example of which is the tower-tops found in Angkor Thom. The prāng in Siam has undergone a series of developments, the latest of which may be seen in the big cedi of Wat Arun, colloquially called Wat Chang, opposite Wat Po on the other side of the river. Such monuments are generally called prāng instead of cedi, although their purpose is similar to that of a cedi. It is, in fact, a cedi in the shape of a prāng.

The gigantic cedi at Phra Pathom was formerly a dome-like structure with a prāng on top. A replica of the original cedi may still be seen in the precincts of the great monument. This original cedi was later, in the reign of King Mongkut, completely covered by the present big cedi.
To sum up then there are three types of cedi, namely: the one with a tapering slender spire, which is the most frequently met with; the one with a prang on top; and the one which is a prang entirely.

If one looks at the spires of the prasatd, or royal palace, one will notice that there are also two kinds of them. One is the slender tapering spire shooting up from the middle of the roof, such as may be seen in the case of Dusit Mahaprasad in the Grand Palace; and the other is a prang placed on top of the roof in a similar way, only one example of which exists. It is at the Royal Pantheon in the precincts of the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha. One will note at a glance that the slender tapering spire of a prasatd is, in structure and composition, similar to the first kind of a cedi. The only difference lies in the superimposed circles above the platform of a cedi, the lower part of which becomes, in the case of the prasatd, a number of flat pieces with pointed tops arranged round the axis. Its upper part rises in three diminishing tiers of "lotus clusters". Such an upper part is in some instances found on the spire of a cedi too. The flat pieces with pointed tops are called hDam in Siamese, from the Sanskrit hema, meaning gold. Hence the King's Palace of the prasatd type is called prasatd yod hDam in differentiation from the prasatd yod prang, the prasatd with a prang on top.

The Siamese word hDam, from the Sanskrit hema meaning gold, is of course derived from the Sanskrit hima (snow). Now the Himalaya has a peak, the Kailas, where Siva is supposed to dwell. The Himalaya is referred to in Siamese as Hemabanphot (from hema parbata, the golden mountain, so called from the gold-like glitter of its snow). Our flat pieces, which go by the names of hDam, derive their names from this simile. Siamese royalty in the later period of Ayudhya adopted the outward forms of the Khmer theory of divine kingship, in which the monarch is more or less identified with godhead in the person of Siva, the Hindu paramount
god, and was therefore expected to dwell on what is made to correspond to the śikhara of Kailās where Siva supposedly dwells. Unable perhaps to build a śikhara in wood superimposed on the roof of a prāsād, a structure in the shape of a cedi had to be put up instead. In order to have something resembling a śikhara, a conventional symbol of the golden mountain, or hēm, is added to the slender tapering spire. The case of the prang being superimposed on top of a roof to represent a śikhara like the one at the Royal Pantheon in the precincts of the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha should be taken to be exceptional for it is the only one in existence in the whole country. It was probably not meant to be a human dwelling at all.

There is yet another type of edifice in some of the monasteries which has a spired roof like a prāsād or cedi. This is called a mondop, from the Sanskrit mandapa, referring to temporary shed or building attached to the śikhara. Here in Siam, however, the mondop, such as the one on the raised platform to the north of the Chapel Royal, serves to house the Holy Scriptures. A mondop and a prāsād are similar in superstructure with the exception of the latter’s having a ground plan somewhat like a Greek cross with four more or less projecting porches on each side, while the mondop has a square floor without the many superimposed roofs.

I have deviated too long from my main subject—the cedi. I shall now pick up the thread of my story. Besides the first type of cedi there are of course other types to be found in wats, among which the most numerous is the fourth type where a Buddha-image or images are deposited as already mentioned. It used to be popular belief that to build a wat, to have a Buddha-image cast or to erect a cedi or any other religious monument was meritorious. Moreover persons who erected a cedi, in addition to gaining merit thereby, desired it to serve as a place where they could have the ashes of their departed dear ones properly deposited in an atmosphere of sanctity in the same way as Christians used to
deposit the remains of their departed relatives near the cross. Hence these čedi both large and small are to be found everywhere in monasteries or infrequently in uninhabited places perched on high by a mountain side.

Later the building of these čedi degenerated, and cheap inartistic ones were constructed with nothing sacred deposited within but the ashes of the common dead. In fact enterprising Chinese artisans cast some of these čedi ready-made in cement in detachable parts. Thus some wats on the outskirts of big cities are studded with these cheap čedi. In the north and the northeast provinces people sometimes build brick cells in the shape of a čedi and deposit therein the ashes of their dead. They do not call these monuments čedi but kū, that is, cells.

In building a čedi in the old days, in addition to depositing in it images of the Buddha, valuables such as jewels and gold were also included as offerings to the Buddha. Such a custom has in later times one undesirable effect, for the čedi is partly destroyed by treasure hunters.

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The Buddhist stupa at Sānci, India.
Phra ċedi, the mondop and the Royal Pantheon in the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace, Bangkok.
The spire of the Prasād. From top to bottom the parts of the spire are as follows: the dew drop; the plī or plantain bud; the round ball; the bua waeng or fillets; the bua klum or lotus cluster; the hém; the balang or platform; the neck; the bell.
A replica of the original cedi of Phra Pathom at Nakorn Pathom.
The big Buddhist cedi (stupa) of Phra Pathom at Nakorn Pathom
The phra prang at Wat Arun, Bangkok.
The mondop and the Royal Pantheon, in the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace, Bangkok.
Dusit Mahāprāsāt, the Grand Palace, Bangkok.