



An Introduction to Borobudur

Borobudur located approx 40km north of Yogyakarta, Central Java was built between 760 and 830 C.E. during the peak of the ruling Sailendra dynasty worshipping Mahayana and Tantrayana forms of Buddhism.

The only surviving monument of its type in Java, Borobudur can be identified as a cosmic mountain, a *stupa*, and a *mandala* showing the path of a spiritual journey from the mundane world of karmic action and rebirth, to the supreme reality beyond form. Comprising of six square platforms topped by three circular platforms, there are 2,672 relief panels and 504 Buddha statues. The main dome, located at the center of the top platform, is surrounded by 72 Buddha statues seated inside perforated stupas.

Borobudur is both a shrine to the Lord Buddha and a place for Buddhist pilgrimage. The journey for pilgrims begins at the base of the monument and follows a path circumambulating the monument clockwise while ascending to the top through the three levels of Buddhist cosmology:

Kāmadhātu -the world of desire

Rupadhatu -the world of forms

Arupadhatu -the world of formlessness

During the journey pilgrims are guided through a system of stairways and corridors depicting the Life of Buddha.

During the 10th century, the center of power moved to East Java and a series of volcanic eruptions took place. It is not certain whether the latter influenced the former but several sources mention this as the most likely period of Borobudur's abandonment.

By the 14th century, the Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms declined and the Javanese converted to Islam. For centuries, Borobudur was deserted.

Worldwide knowledge of its existence was revealed again in 1814 by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the then British ruler of Java, who was advised of its location by native Indonesians. Borobudur has since been preserved through several restorations.

The largest restoration project was undertaken between 1975 and 1982 by the Indonesian government and UNESCO, after which the monument was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991.

Borobudur today is still used for pilgrimage.

Each year during *Waisak*- the Full Moon of May the Birth, Enlightenment and Passing of Lord Buddha is honored with processions and candlelit meditations.



Candi Borobudur

In Indonesian, ancient temples are known as *candi*; thus "Borobudur Temple" is locally known as *Candi Borobudur*. The term *candi* (*chedi* in Thai, *caitya* in Sanskrit) is also used more loosely to describe a stupa. Borobudur is built as a single large stupa, and when viewed from above, takes the form of a giant tantric Buddhist *mandala*, simultaneously representing the Buddhist cosmology and the nature of mind.

A *stupa* is usually intended as a shrine containing a relic of Lord Buddha. The famous Indian King Asoka adopted Buddhism following his distress of the suffering caused upon the Kalinga clan whom he defeated in a rival war. King Asoka began to erect many stupas containing Buddha relics which symbolized order of the cosmos establishing the righteousness of Southeast Asian Buddhist monarchs as *Dhamma-rajās*.

A temple, on the other hand, is used as a house of deity and has inner spaces for worship. Although Borobudur has no inner space, and the main stupa is empty, the complexity of the monument's design suggests Borobudur is in fact a temple worshipped in pilgrimage.

The origins of the name *Borobudur* is unknown. The name *Borobudur* was first written in Sir Thomas Raffles' book on Javan history. Raffles wrote about a monument called *borobudur*, but there are no older documents suggesting the same name. The only old Javanese manuscript that hints at the monument as a holy Buddhist sanctuary is *Nagarakretagama*, written by Mpu Prapanca in 1365.

The name 'Bore-Budur', and thus 'BoroBudur', is thought to have been written by Raffles in English grammar to mean the nearby village of Bore. Most *candi* are named after a nearby village. If it followed Javanese language, the monument should have been named 'BudurBoro'. Raffles also suggested that 'Budur' might correspond to the modern Javanese word *Buda* ('ancient') – or: "ancient Boro." However, another archaeologist suggests the second component of the name ('Budur') comes from Javanese term *bhūdharma* (mountain) or *behudur* (above the hill in Balinese)

Local people also refer to *Agama Buda* or *Agama Hindu* (Buddha and Hindu religion)

History and Harmony

The Sailendras reigned under the influence of the Buddhist Srivijayan Empire which extended from Sumatra up into present day Thailand.

The Sailendras were known as ardent followers of Lord Buddha, though stone inscriptions found at Sojomerto in Central Java, suggest that some may have also been worshipping Hindus.

The Sanjaya Hindu kingdom dates back to 735 and co-existed peacefully with the Sailendras who influenced by Sriwijaya, were involved with trade and who spoke Malay. The Sanjayas granted permission for Buddhist followers to build Buddhist temples. In fact, the Sanjayas gave the village of Kalasan to the Buddhist community, as is written in the Kalasan Charter dated 778 AD. So harmony existed with a Hindu king able to patronize the establishment of a Buddhist monument; and for a Buddhist king to act likewise. Intermarriages and co-operation occurred between the families, but a rival battle which took place in 856 brought myths and legends to the later temples of Prambanan

Volcanoes, Rivers and the Lotus

According to local myth, the area known as Kedu Plain is a Javanese 'sacred' place and has been dubbed 'the garden of Java' due to its high agricultural fertility.

Many Hindu and Buddhist monuments were built on the Kedu plain located between two volcanoes: *Merapi* and *Sundoro-Sumbing* and two rivers: the *Progo* and the *Elo*.

Borobudur, unlike other temples which were built on a flat surface, was built on a bedrock hill, 265 m (869 ft) above sea level and 15 m (49 ft) above the floor of a dried-out lake. The lake's existence was the subject of intense discussion among archaeologists in the twentieth century; Borobudur was thought to have been built on a lake shore or even floated on a lake. In 1931, a Dutch artist and a scholar of Hindu and Buddhist architecture, W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp, developed a theory that Kedu Plain was once a lake and Borobudur initially represented a lotus flower floating on the lake. Lotus flowers are found in almost every Buddhist work of art, often serving as a throne for buddhas and base for stupas. The architecture of Borobudur itself suggests a lotus depiction, in which Buddha postures in Borobudur symbolize the *Lotus Sutra*, Three circular platforms on the top are also thought to represent a lotus leaf.

Mendut-Pawon- Borobudur path

Borobudur is in alignment with 2 smaller temples: **Mendut** and **Pawon**.

It appears a brick-paved road with walls on both sides led from Mendut to Borobudur forming a sacred unity for the pilgrim.

Mendut (3km from Borobudur) is the oldest of the three built by King Indra of the Saliendra dynasty. The stairwell narrates an animal story of Buddha. The outer wall is adorned with bas-reliefs of Bodhisattvas. The inner hall has 3 impressive statues. The seated **Vairocana** (Dhayana Buddha) helps liberate devotees of bodily karma. To the Left is **Avalokitesvara** (Buddha of Compassion) liberating the karma of speech. To the Right is **Vajrapani** who helps liberate the karma of thought. The small **Candi Pawon** served to purify one's mind prior to ascending Borobudur.

Architecture

Approximately 55,000 cubic meters (72,000 cu yd) of stones were taken from neighbouring rivers to build Borobudur. The stone was cut to size, transported to the site and laid without mortar. Knobs, indentations and dovetails were used to form joints between stones. The monument is equipped with a good drainage system to cater for the area's high stormwater run-off. To avoid inundation, 100 spouts are provided at each corner with unique carved gargoyles in the shape of giants or *makaras*.



Access to the upper levels is through stairways at the centre of each 4 sides with a number of arched gates, watched by a total of 32 lion statues. The gates are adorned with the head of Kala carved on the top center of each portal with *makaras* projecting from each side. This *Kala-Makara* style is commonly found in Javanese temples. The main entrance is at the eastern side, the location of the first narrative reliefs.

Little is known about the architect **Gunadharma**. His name is actually recounted from Javanese legendary folk tales rather than written in old inscriptions. The basic unit measurement he used during the construction was called *tala*, defined as the length of a human face from the forehead's hairline to the tip of the chin or the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the middle finger when both fingers are stretched at their maximum distance. Archeologists conjectured the purpose of the ratio formula and the *tala* dimension has calendrical, astronomical and cosmological themes, as is the case in the Hindu and Buddhist temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia



Reliefs

were created after the building had been completed. Approximately 2,670 individual bas reliefs (1,460 narrative and 1,212 decorative panels)

Starting from the eastern entrance stairway to the left, narrative panels on the wall read from right to left, while on the balustrade, they read from left to right. This conforms with *pradaksina*, the ritual of circumambulation performed by pilgrims who move in a clockwise direction while keeping the sanctuary to their right

The Hidden Foot and Kamadhatu

In 1885, restorers discovered a hidden structure under the base which is known as the “hidden foot” and the realm of *Kamadhatu*- depicting *Karmavibhangga*- - the law of karma- cause and effect.

The 160 panels do not form a continuous story, but each panel provides one illustration of cause and effect of our actions. There are depictions of blameworthy activities, from gossip to murder, with their corresponding punishments. There are also praiseworthy activities that include charity and pilgrimage to sanctuaries, and their subsequent rewards. The pains of hell and the pleasure of heaven are also illustrated. There are scenes of daily life, complete with the full panorama of *samsara* (the endless cycle of birth and death).

Jatakamala or Jataka tales

Reliefs continue to depict the Buddha’s former lives. Jatakas are stories about the Buddha before he was born as Prince Siddhartha.

Avadanas are similar to Jatakas, but the main figure is not the Bodhisattva himself.

The saintly deeds in avadanas are attributed to other legendary persons.



The Jataka story of Prince Sudhana and the Princess Manohara

Manohara is the Kinnari (half woman, half bird) heroine and the youngest of seven daughters of the Kinara King, who lives on Mount Meru (Kailash) One day, she travels to the human realm. She is caught by a hunter who gives her to Prince Sudhana. The prince falls in love with Manohara, and they get married.

Later, when the prince is away in battle, Manohara is accused of bringing bad luck to the city and is threatened with death. She flies away, back to the Kinnara Kingdom. She leaves behind a ring and the directions to reach the Kinnara Kingdom, so that Prince Sudhana can follow her. Prince Sudhana returns to the city and follows after her. After an extensive and adventurous journey with many tests assessing strength, perseverance, and wit, he finds Manohara. They then live happily ever after.

This Jataka tale is also very popular in Thailand and Cambodia

Gandavyuha - Sudhana's search for the Ultimate Truth

Further panels are devoted to Sudhana's continued tireless wandering in search of the Highest Perfect Wisdom.

It covers two galleries (third and fourth) and also half of the second gallery; comprising in total of 460 panels. Sudhana appears on the 16th panel. The preceding 15 panels form a prologue to the story of the miracles during Buddha's *samadhi* in the Garden of Jeta. During his search, Sudhana visited no less than 30 teachers but none of them had satisfied him completely. He was then instructed by **Manjusri (the Bodhisattva of Wisdom)** to meet the monk Megasri, where he was given the first doctrine. As his journey continues, Sudhana meets (in the following order) Supratisthita, the physician Megha (Spirit of Knowledge), the banker Muktaka, the monk Saradhvaja, the upasika Asa (Spirit of Supreme Enlightenment), Bhismottaranirghosa, the Brahmin Jayosmayatna, Princess Maitrayani, the monk Sudarsana, a boy called Indriyessvara, the upasika Prabhuta, the banker Ratnachuda, King Anala, the god Siva Mahadeva, Queen Maya, Bodhisattva Maitreya and then back to Manjusri. Each meeting has given Sudhana a specific doctrine, knowledge and wisdom. These meetings are shown in the third gallery.

After the last meeting with Manjusri, Sudhana went to the residence of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra; depicted in the fourth gallery. The entire series of the fourth gallery is devoted to the teaching of **Samantabhadra (the patron of the Lotus sutra)** and who was an attendant to Shakyamuni- former Prince Siddhartha Gautama, spiritual teacher of Buddhism. The narrative panels finally end with Sudhana's achievement of the Supreme Knowledge and the Ultimate Truth.

The Lalitavistara- the story of the Birth of Buddha



Queen Maya is shown riding a horse carriage retreating to Lumbini to give birth to Prince Siddhartha Gautama.

The story starts from the glorious descent of the Lord Buddha from the Tushita heaven, and ends with his first sermon in the Deer Park near Benares (Varanasi)

The Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha, son of King Sudhodana and Queen Maya of Kapilavastu (present-day Nepal). The story is preceded by 27 panels showing various preparations, in heavens and on earth, to welcome the final incarnation of the Bodhisattva. Before descending from Tushita heaven, the Bodhisattva entrusted his crown to his successor, the future Buddha Maitreya. He descended on earth in the shape of a white elephant and penetrated to Queen Maya's right womb. Queen Maya had a dream of this event, which was interpreted that her son would become either a sovereign or a Buddha.



When Queen Maya felt that it was the time to give birth, she went to the Lumbini Park outside the Kapilavastu city. She stood under a canon ball tree- (also known as *Sal* tree to Buddhists, or *plaksa* tree in Sanskrit.) Holding one branch with her right hand, she gave birth to a son, Prince Siddhartha. The story on the panels continues until the prince becomes the Buddha.

Witnessing the realities of people ageing, sick and suffering, Prince Siddhartha Gautama abandoned his sheltered, luxurious life of the palace to understand the meaning of life. After a long journey as an ascetic hermit with years of contemplation and meditation, Siddhartha (also known as Shakyamuni) realized complete awakening and insight into the nature and cause of human suffering along with steps necessary to eliminate it.

This was categorized into: **Four Noble Truths**

The first is: There is *dukkha* (suffering)

The second: Craving and attachment is cause of *dukkha*

Third: The cessation of *dukkha* which leads to Nirvana is achieved by elimination of craving and attachment.

Attachment to five *khandhas* which makes up an individual - body, feelings, perceptions, intentions and acts of consciousness

Fourth: The attainment of Nirvana-the state of supreme liberation is possible by following the noble eightfold path.

Noble Eightfold Path:

Right Action, Right Speech, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness
Right Concentration, Right View, Right Thought.

These original teachings became of the foundation of the school of Theravada Buddhism. (the way of the elders)

Theravada, also referred to by some as Hinayana Buddhism, is practiced today in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.

Mahayana Buddhism established later and involves more of a ritual context, spread into northern Asia: Tibet, Mongolia, China, Japan (Zen) Korea, Vietnam.

Indonesia today has a small population of practicing Buddhists- mostly ethnic Chinese. A small monastery next to Candi Mendut, set amidst lovely gardens and ponds is residence to a few monks and receives visiting monks a few times a year for meditation retreats.

The Buddhist Trinity or The Triple Gems:

The Buddha – the enlightened one, awakened from illusion and ignorance.

The Dharma (or Dhamma) teachings of the Buddha

The Sangha – the community which worships the Dhamma and Buddha

Buddha statues

Apart from the story of Buddhist cosmology carved in stone, Borobudur has many statues of various Buddhas.

Cross-legged statues are seated in lotus position and distributed on the five square platforms (the *Rupadhatu* level) as well as on the top platform (the *Arupadhatu* level).

The Buddha statues are in niches at the *Rupadhatu* level, arranged in rows on the outer sides of the balustrades. The number of statues decrease as platforms progressively diminish to the upper level. The first balustrades have 104 niches, the second 104, the third 88, the fourth 72 and the fifth 64. In total, there are 432 Buddha statues at the *Rupadhatu* level.

At the *Arupadhatu* level (or the three circular platforms), Buddha statues are placed inside perforated stupas. The first circular platform has 32 stupas, the second 24 and the third 16, that add up to 72 stupas. Total 504 Buddha statues.

Of the original 504 Buddha statues, over 300 are damaged (mostly headless) 43 are missing. Many have been stolen as collector items, mostly for Western museums.

Mudras

At glance, all the Buddha statues appear similar, but there is a subtle difference between them in the *mudras* or the position of the hands.

There are five groups of *mudra*:

North, East, South, West and Zenith, which represent the five cardinal compass points.

Buddha statues inside the 72 stupas on the top platform have the same *mudra*:



Dharmachakra Mudra

Turning the Wheel of the Law

symbolizing Sakyamuni's first sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath, near Varanasi in India.

Both hands held at chest, left hand under right hand and rotated upward with the thumb touching the ring finger, while the ring finger of right hand touches the left little finger.

This position gives the impression of a rotation wheel, and is connected with *Vairocana* who helps liberate bodily karma.

Direction: Zenith (above)

4 other Directions:



Bhumispara Mudra Direction: East

Calling the Earth to witness

The Buddha's right hand is pointing to the earth, placed on the right knee with fingers pointing downward.

This mudra symbolizes the Buddha's request to the God of the Earth to witness his attitude when he denied the temptations of Mara.



Abhaya Mudra Direction: North

No Fear

Buddha position where his right hand placed on the right thigh, with palms facing upwards, a position which is an effort to drive out fear.



Dhyana Mudra Direction: West

Meditation

Both hands open and placed on the lap, right hand above the left hand, and both thumbs touching each other.



Vara mudra Direction: South

Charity

Right hand rotated upwards with fingers downward and placed on the right knee.

and:



Virtaka mudra All Directions

mudra to weigh the decision carefully

Right hand raised above the right knee, with palm facing upwards, tip of the thumb touching the index finger.

Reliefs of ships and ancient trade



The bas reliefs of Borobudur also depict everyday life of 8th century ancient Java, from the courtly palace life to those of commoners in the village. It depicted temple, marketplace, architecture, flora and fauna, dress, jewelry and fashion, as well as mode of transportation such as palanquin, horse carriage and ship. In 1982, Philip Beale a British sailor who served in the British Royal Navy, visited Borobudur to study traditional

ships and marine traditions. He was fascinated with ten bas relief images of ancient vessels depicted on Borobudur. Since then he planned to reconstruct this ancient ship to re-enact the ancient maritime trade route known as The Cinnamon Route which extended from Indonesia to Madagascar.

In 2003, the re-created *Samudra Raksa* (Defender of the seas) was launched and set off to retrace the ancient voyages to Madagascar and continued around the Cape of Africa. The *Samudra Raksa* is now back at Borobudur along with an exhibit of the fascinating history of Indonesian seafarers. www.borobudurshipexpedition.com



A Testimony to continued cycle of life

Having slept hidden for centuries under layers of volcanic ash and jungle growth, Borobudur was rediscovered and restored to its former glory. Yet the Buddha's teachings of impermanence are a constant reminder.

On 27 May 2006, an earthquake of 6.2 magnitude on the Richter scale struck the south coast of Central Java. The event caused severe damage around the region and casualties to the nearby city of Yogyakarta. Borobudur remained intact. Mt. Merapi remains very active and in 2010, a series of eruptions have caused thousands of villagers to lose their homes and plantations at the foot of the volcano. Borobudur was again blanketed in ash. Months of clean-up have again been completed.



May Borobudur remain an inspiration for continued wisdom and understanding