

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Kadam Chorten (Stupa)*** ([Image](#))

Metal, sculpture Brass and [unknown] interior dedication materials

13.5 inches

Tsang District

Ca. 13th or 14th Century

Kadam School?

Museum #: 92.054

By Chris Moore

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Kadam stupas generally function as reliquaries. While many contain the ashes of a lama or other revered person, some merely contain associated articles. Frequently, they hold various bits of treasure, ranging from pieces of amber and coral, to coins, to fragments from a lama's robe. Additionally, some stupas even hold the *dharma* itself, containing passages from sutras and fragments of paintings (Bentor, 1995, 252).

Regardless of content, like other stupas and ritual images, Kadam stupas undergo consecration ceremonies. During these ceremonies, the stupas are vivified with the presence of an enlightened being. Thus, in addition to containing the *dharma*, Kadam stupas are believed to embody a Buddha, both literally and conceptually.

Accordingly, Kadam stupas can serve as surrogates for larger, architectural stupas. For like all Tibetan stupas, Kadam stupas magnify a Buddha's omnipresence, creating a space filled with enlightened energy. This sacred space is generated during the consecration ritual as the enlightened presence is asked to reside within the stupa for the benefit of sentient beings (Bentor, 1997, 239).

This sacredness is further emphasized by the stupa's form. The very heart mind of an enlightened presence is reflected in the shape of the Kadam stupa. In fact, all Tibetan stupas embody this presence. They are representations of Mt. Meru, the internal world system of all who strive towards enlightenment, and thus represent enlightenment itself. By extension, all stupas also embody the mandala, the palace at the top of Mt. Meru where the transcendent Buddhas reside. Thus, all stupas, including Kadam stupas, evoke the sacred space of enlightenment not only through consecration but through their form as well.

As a result, any act performed near a stupa, regardless of size, is performed near a Buddha and is magnified tenfold. Thus, like monumental stupas, Kadam stupas serve as objects of ritual devotion. As most Kadam stupas are portable, they are often venerated during journeys, perhaps enroute to pilgrimage sites, when monumental stupas are not accessible.

However, Kadam stupas are not distinguished from other stupas based on their size or portability, rather they are distinguished by their form. Although Kadam stupas possess the same underlying elements as stupas in general, these elements take on a distinctive form and arrangement. Perhaps the most easily recognizable feature of this stupa form, is its overall bell-like shape. Other essential

elements are the row of doubled lotus petals along the base, the *pancaratha*-form or stepped *harmika*, the conical arrangement of thirteen *bhumis* surrounding a central axis, and the lotus-form top piece.

Both of these metal stupas from the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art correspond to this Kadam form. The shorter, less elaborate example is of an earlier date. The open-work and turquoise inlay on the top piece of the taller stupa, are later features, as is the overall lengthening of the vertical proportions. Thus, although overtime they become more elaborate, all changes in the Kadam stupa form are stylistic rather than iconographic. In fact, this Kadam form is present, virtually unchanged, in modern stupas, most notably those erected in Odiyan California during the 1970s (Cook, 379).

This form has its roots in ancient India. It is based on a stupa brought to Tibet by Atisa, the great teacher of the second propagation of Buddhist doctrine. Indeed, the stupa serves as one of his attributes. In painting [#97.085](#), from the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art, Atisa is the figure in the upper right hand corner holding a stupa. The main figure in the painting is Dromdon, Atisa's disciple who founded the Kadampa sect. These stupas are still most closely linked to this sect, as is reflected in the name "Kadam." Incidentally, relics of both Atisa and Dromdon are enshrined within large Kadam stupas at the Netong Drolma Lhakhuang monastery, the site of Atisa's death in 1054 (Cook, 276,77)

In summary, Kadam stupas possess a sacred form that has remained static from at least the time of Atisa. Through this form, enlightenment is reaffirmed through multiple layers of meaning. Thus, Kadam stupas transcend their role as reliquaries. For as reliquaries, they merely commemorate great individuals. However as stupas, they evoke the heart mind of a Buddha. This dual purpose further reaffirms the belief that all sentient beings are potential Buddhas and contain within the seed of enlightenment. Thus, like Tibetan art in general, Kadam stupas serve as mirrors into the heart©mind.

References:

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