



## THE SOTOBA (GORINTO) EXPLAINED

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A common representation found in Buddhism is that of the sotoba or stupa (J.: gorinto). This was originally a form of mausoleum built over a sacred area and usually containing a relic of either the Buddha or a revered teacher. With the passage of time, the exterior form of the sotoba changed considerably, those of China, Tibet and India differing widely. However, despite these external differences, the sotoba always included symbolic shapes peculiar to the *godai* (Five Elements, Mahabhuta). These were an integral part of the sotoba construction and in line with the doctrine that the physical body, being composed of five elements, would in death return to them.

The Sotoba became a symbol for the doctrine of the *godai* teachings. The esoteric form of the sotoba, used in texts, does not always look like the actual one which is constructed, mainly for practical reasons. However, each sotoba contains five representative shapes.

The square represents 'Earth', the sphere 'Water', the triangle is 'Fire', the crescent 'Air' and the last shape - which is one part that differs most from country to country - represents the 'Ether' /'Energy' or 'Void'.

In the esoteric teachings the first two parts (square, earth, and circle, water) describe the most perfect doctrine, containing within them the other three shapes. Together they represent the *Jitsuzaikai* which is the realm of perfect and authentic understanding. The other three belong to the *Henkai* or realm of transmutation. The *Henkai* contains also the *Genshokai* or phenomenal, experiential world within which we live.

Each part of the Sotoba corresponds to an Element of change both at the *Henkai* and *Jitsuzaikai* levels.

The topmost symbol (representing 'Ether') is formed of an amalgam of the crescent (representing Wisdom) and the triangle (representing Principle). The union of these two qualities within the *Genshokai* and *Henkai* being symbolic of perfection within the world we know and is representative of Buddhahood.

The triangle of Fire, situated as it is between the two pairs is both a principle of unification and of movement, It is like a pivot between the worlds and shows the intense activity which needs to be generated in order to attain Enlightenment.

The crescent of 'Water' is also symbolic of receptivity and is situated rather like a cup pointing towards the heavens.

The circle (Wisdom attainment) shows in itself completion and perfection in all ways. It has no top or bottom no matter whichever way one rolls it.

The square is a symbol in itself of the four material Elements (*shidai* or *shigio*), its four sides being equally necessary. It is the home of the *Taizokai*, or realm of things as they appear.

The pattern of the sotoba is also representative of the order in which the student progresses in spiritual studies. The square describes the basis of study, the recognition of the will to be perfect. The circle is the development of equanimity. The triangle represents the energy we create in pursuit of truth. The crescent shows the development of intuition and transcending awareness. The crescent/triangle represents completion and perfection of both Wisdom and Compassion.

Because the sotoba contains all the shapes of the *godai*, it forms an important instrument in explaining the teachings relating to them and some representation of it is always found within a Shingon temple. It was often utilised instead of a Buddha image within shrines in times of religious persecution.

The sotoba forms a paradigm of the Mikkyo teachings and practice and remains still a symbol of the secret initiation ceremonies of Shingon-shu doctrine. It is also the traditional headstone shape of a Shingon grave.

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