

# Symbols Of A Sacred Landscape

## Tongdo Zen Buddhist Monastery, Korea



*The path at Tongdo-sa begins at the bridges over the river.*

**T**HE DELIMITING OF THE SACRED OFTEN requires remote locations reached only by lengthy path sequences; paths that traverse sacred landscapes and lead to sanctuaries and temples have enjoyed a long and distinguished history. Separation requires the means of connection: thresholds and pathways that lead from outside to inside, from the undifferentiated secular to the specific sacred. Dating from Neolithic earthworks and stone circles, which often included causewayed approaches, paths have served the symbolic agendas and ritual uses of sacred architecture. From Greek sacred sites such as Delphi to the acropolis sites of many Christian pilgrimage churches, incorporation and transformation

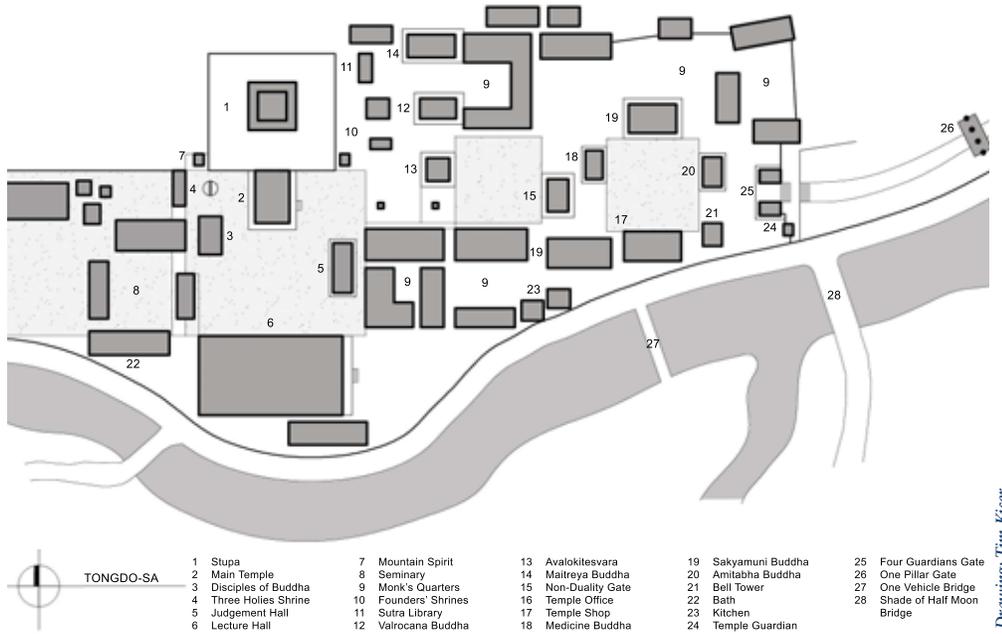
of the landscape were integral to the creation of the sacred realm. In particular, it is perhaps in the East that the symbolism of the path has found some of its most expansive expression.

Tongdo Zen Buddhist Monastery, one of the most important temples in Korea, illustrates and explicates the interrelationship of path, landscape, and sacred places. Tongdo-sa was founded in 646 CE as a mountain hermitage, and grew to be one of the most important monasteries in Korea<sup>1</sup>. Today it is an extensive campus of historically significant buildings that support an active community of more than a hundred monks. Even though at one level Tongdo-sa is organized according to a hierarchical, axial path sequence—a sequential

spatial sequence and symbolic narrative that leads to the sacred center of the main Buddha Hall—a deeper reading reveals its relationships to its surrounding landscape and a dynamic interrelationship of multiple centers congruent with aspects of esoteric Mahayana Buddhism.

### KOREAN MONASTIC ARCHITECTURE

The walled compounds of Korean Zen monasteries provide enclosed sanctuaries to serve the Buddhist communities they physically define. They comprise consistent layouts, configurations, and building types, with variations and inflections according to their particular emphasis or location. Monasteries are typically located next to rivers on the southern slopes



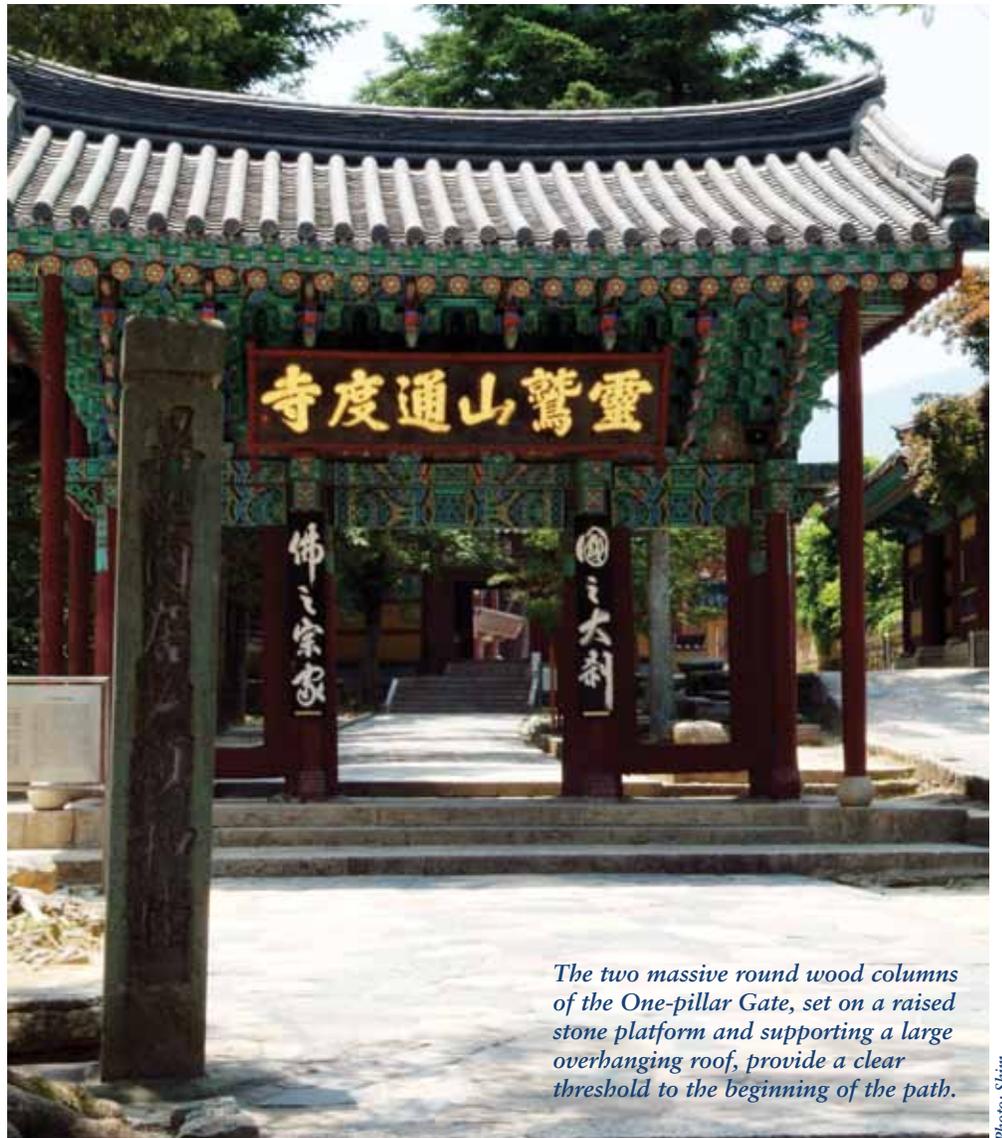
*The monastery is organized around three courtyards, each distinguished by the temples and buildings that form them.*

Drawing: Tim Kiser

by Thomas Barrie, AIA

Photo: Shim

of mountains, and they employ an elongated path sequence of bridges, gateways, buildings, and courtyards. The location of monasteries on the southern slopes of mountains next to rivers, with the main temple buildings facing in the auspicious south direction, correspond to the principles of *Pungsu-jiri* (Wind and Water, or *Feng Shui* in Chinese), that aims to place buildings in harmony with their environmental setting. Entry paths are typically aligned north/south (though there are often shifting segments to avoid inauspicious straight lines), ascending steps up steep slopes and through a series of courtyards. However, there are exceptions and inflections to these general site-planning



*The two massive round wood columns of the One-pillar Gate, set on a raised stone platform and supporting a large overhanging roof, provide a clear threshold to the beginning of the path.*

Photo: Shim



*The Four Guardians Gate.*

rules, as we will observe at Tongdo-sa.

As in the sacred architecture of other faiths, locations, and historical settings, Korean monasteries are distinguished by choreographed spatial sequences and articulate symbolic narratives. The gateways, temples, and occasional buildings serve both practical and symbolic functions. Many monasteries transformed the steep slopes of their mountainside locations to create an elongated entry sequence that traverses a series of gateways and courtyards to attain increasingly sacred spaces leading to the main temple buildings. A long approach path through dense forests and over one or more bridges typically initiates the entry sequence. The bridges provide a physical passage, while their evocative names, such as “other shore, “mind washing,” “three purities,” “traverse the void,” or “ultimate bliss,” suggest a spiritual passage from one mode of being to another—from

delusion to enlightenment. The One-pillar Gate formally initiates the entry sequence and comprises either two or four aligned wooden columns supporting a massive, overhanging roof. The Four Guardians Gate, a small pavilion with interior spaces on either side of the pathway, is the next threshold marker. Inside, the Four Heavenly Kings, each associated with a cardinal direction, flank the path. The next threshold marker is the Non-duality Gate, its name referencing a central Buddhist concept of the unity of opposites where the “false” boundaries of self and others, individual and universal, are dissolved. Each gateway marks thresholds to distinct precincts of the monastery, which are defined by buildings that serve the symbolic agendas and ritual activities of the monastery.

#### TONGDO SOEN BUDDHIST MONASTERY

Tongdo-sa is located on the northern

banks of a river and on the gentle southern slope of Youngchuk Mountain. Its entrance path approaches from the east<sup>2</sup>, where three bridges cross the river and lead to the walled compound that clearly demarks the sacred precinct. The monastery is organized around three courtyards, each one distinguished by the temples and buildings that form it. The first courtyard includes temples dedicated to the prayers and supplications of lay worshippers. The next courtyard serves the monks and comprises buildings that house the four levels of the Buddhist college. The third and largest courtyard is dedicated to the Buddha and features the Main Temple (the Deawungjeon or Hero Hall).

Tongdo-sa evidences articulate spatial compositions that sequentially deliver a range of symbolism and embody meanings for both the lay and the monastic communities. The path begins at bridges that cross the river and lead to the One-pillar Gate, where massive round wood columns on a raised stone platform support a large overhanging roof to provide a clear threshold to the beginning of the path. After passing through the One-pillar Gate the path shifts to the right and approaches the main entrance to the monastery, clearly established by its size, scale, depth, and flanking monastery walls. Wide stone steps lead up to the broad platform of the Four Guardians Gate, where inside the flanking figures of the Four Heavenly Kings dominate the enclosed space. This shadowed space leads to a small forecourt defined by a two-story Bell Pavilion on its southern side<sup>3</sup>. Passing by this open, wooden, trabeated structure, one ascends to the first courtyard where shrines serve human desires: health, well being, future wishes. At its western edge, a step leads to another forecourt and the Non-duality Gate.

The Non-duality Gate, entered by a set of steps, leads to the second courtyard and marks the threshold from the realm of human desires to one defined by the community of monks committed to overcoming them. The three-bay building, enclosed on three sides, with a central entrance opening on its eastern side but open to the west, frames a view of the main temple. Next one ascends steps to the third courtyard. This is the court of the Buddha, the enlightened one, fronted by the southern facing Hero Hall. To the north of the Hero Hall is the stupa, and to the west of the courtyard a seminary for cloistered monks.

#### SYMBOLISM, MEANING, AND RITUAL USE

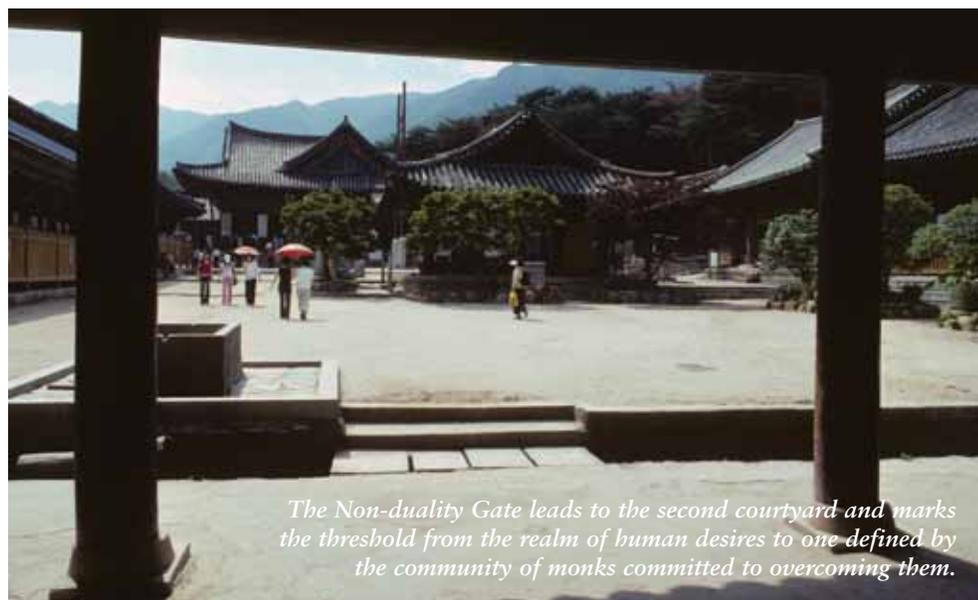
Clearly demarked boundaries and spaces, choreographed spatial sequences calibrated by proportion and geometry, and an exten-

sive symbolic narrative create the sacred monastery realm. Its boundaries are clearly demarked by walls and buildings, and are entered and traversed by a sequence of gates and courtyards. However, there are multiple aspects regarding its use, symbolism, and meaning. For example, lay worshippers may understand the path sequence as a hierarchy of spaces leading from lower to higher realms. Furthermore, even though the monastery is a symbolic fortress protected by the guardian deities of the Four Heavenly Kings, it also comprises multiple centers, an organization of discrete places serving specific functions and symbolizing discrete world views. Its multivalent scales and meanings comprise a dynamic hierarchy that is both created and mediated by the path sequence.

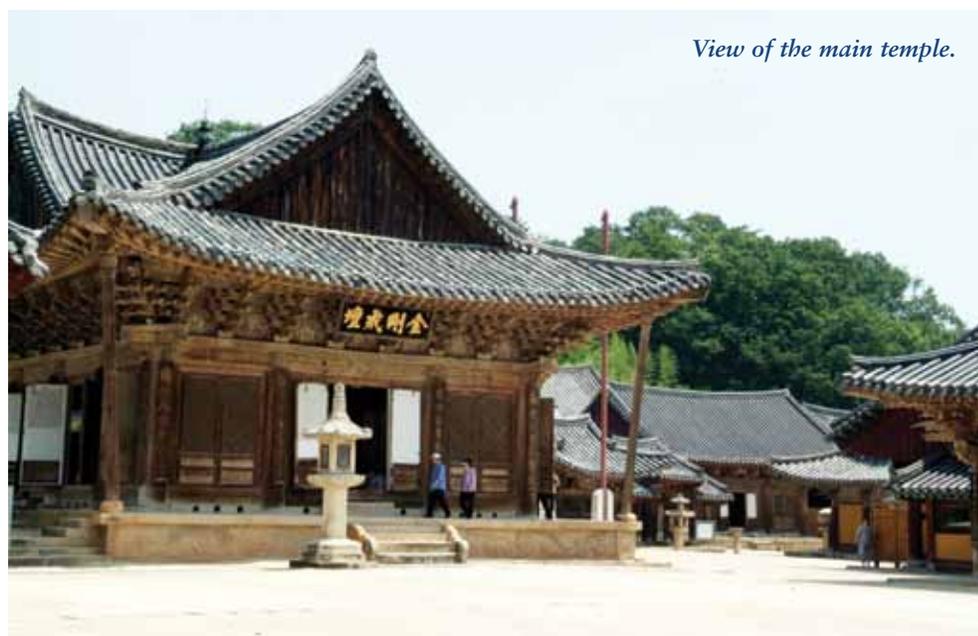
In its broadest context the monastery occupies five centers or realms: the realm of humans (and human desires) of the lower courtyard, the realm of *Bodhisattvas* (the community of monks) of the middle courtyard, the realm of the Buddha of the third courtyard, the realm of *Ahrats* (the seminary of cloistered monks), and lastly the mountain itself to the west. Youngchuk Mountain (also known as Vulture Peak), is named for a mountain in India where the Buddha is believed to have delivered the Lotus Sutra, and its incorporation into the spatial composition of the monastery symbolizes the possibility of enlightenment for all that this sutra describes.

One way of understanding the organization of Tongdo-sa is in the context of a mandala pattern. Mandalas are two- and in some examples three-dimensional diagrams utilized by Mahayana Buddhism as models of Buddhist cosmologies and as meditative mediums. In Mahayana Buddhism mandalas are meditative mediums<sup>4</sup> where a symbolic path that leads to the sacred center circumambulates through a sequence of realms. The Lotus Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism<sup>5</sup> includes descriptions of multiple worlds, each created and maintained by *Bodhisattvas*. Mandalas of the Eight *Bodhisattvas*, favored by Pure Land Buddhism, symbolized these worlds and featured eight *Bodhisattvas* surrounding a seated Buddha. The multiple realms of the eight principal temples at Tongdo-sa surrounding the main temple and stupa can be viewed as a replication of this prevalent mandala pattern.

Monasteries that correspond to these patterns are hierarchical organizations with the main temple at the center, surrounded by lesser shrines and temples, and reached through a series of gateways. At Tongdo-sa the Hero's Hall and stupa form twin centers of the mandala pattern of the five realms of the



*The Non-duality Gate leads to the second courtyard and marks the threshold from the realm of human desires to one defined by the community of monks committed to overcoming them.*



*View of the main temple.*

Photo: Shim

monastery<sup>6</sup>. The multiple tiers, thresholds and passages of the mandala symbolize the spiritual journey, a central element of Buddhism. The journey from the outer to the inner realms of the monastery also symbolizes the path to the mountain hermitage of the enlightened Zen master. Tongdo-sa, like many Korean Zen Buddhist monasteries, was founded as a simple hermitage. The first Chinese Zen monasteries are believed to have begun as mountainside retreats founded by Zen masters who attracted students who then built their own huts nearby; Zen landscape paintings from the Chinese Southern Sung period idealized the prototypical hermit scholar's retreat. The journey of the religious aspirant at Tongdo-sa, across bridges and ascending a series of spaces towards a sacred mountain, replicates the archetypal pilgrimage to the sacred place of an enlightened being celebrated in Zen Buddhism and sym-

bolizes the individual effort stressed in Zen Buddhist practices<sup>7</sup>.

The multiple scales of the paths, buildings, spaces, and environmental setting of the monastery articulate the dynamic relationships of its multicentered composition, and reinforce its individual and collective symbolism. The bridges, gates, path surfaces, steps, scales, hierarchies, and framed vistas reinforce the individual nature of the spiritual path of Buddhism. However, the singular, humanly scaled gateways and courtyards are also integral elements of the cosmic scale of the monastery, unified by collective symbols of proportion and geometry to create hierarchies of space and scale. The symbolism and significance of the hierarchies of scale reinforce the monastery's multicentered organization; the cosmic scale of its mandala pattern symbolizes aspects of Mahayana Buddhism; the



collective scale of the individual courtyards accommodates the lay and monastic communities; and the individual scale of the shrines and hermitages serves the individual penitents and practitioners.

The dynamic path sequence, reinforced by inflections of its surfaces and building orientation, negotiates and unifies the realms of the monastery. The result is a multivalent hierarchy comprising a linear spatial sequence that leads from the lower realms to the sacred center, but with each realm creating its own center and purpose. As it evolved, Buddhism became a highly systematic religion; hence Buddhist texts include both specific spiritual practices and themes that address the immensity of cosmic realms and an individual's place within it. Korean Buddhist monastic life, as symbolized and accommodated by the architecture, is also explicitly structured. Within its formal and hierarchical structure, however,

each monk has freedom to find his or her own path. Within the systematic organization of the monastery, both implicit (the architecture) and explicit (the structure and rules of the monastery), there are multiple paths<sup>8</sup>.

The main Hero Hall at Tongdo-sa is unusual because it does not contain a statue of the Buddha. Instead, a large, horizontal opening in its north wall frames a vista of the stupa: the temple is both a center and a threshold to a larger realm. Even though Buddha figures are absent, the Buddha's presence is manifest in the relics contained in the stupa and in the symbolic imagery of the hall. For example, on the wooden ceiling panels intricate multi-colored paintings of lotus flowers are shown. The lotus is a common Buddhist symbol and decorative motif found in many Hero Halls. Originally an indigenous Indian and Hindu symbol of purity, it became a Buddhist symbol of the perfection of the Buddha and his

teachings. Buddha statues are typically seated on a lotus flower in *padmasana*, or "lotus pose," and Buddhist texts state that when the Buddha gave his first sermon after reaching enlightenment the heavens rained flowers. The imagery of the Buddha hall symbolizes a theme common to many religions, of the "first place," an eternal realm where the gods were present and still are.

Active monasteries such as Tongdo-sa perform roles as mediators between past and present where the past is animated by the architecture, its use, and their interplay. Tongdo-sa is a cultural artifact from which we can, in part, understand its historic and religious settings, perhaps more effectively than scripture or historical sources. It also occupies the present. Lay worshippers pray at its shrines, tourists visit its historically significant artifacts, and monks train in the college and seminary<sup>9</sup>.



Multiple mediations are at play here: the triangulation of participant, place, and larger contexts are multiplied through the different levels of symbolic content, which are calibrated and encoded for the lay and monastic participants. Overall, and similar to communal rituals, the hierarchies of symbolism include a full range for those who choose to “play along.”

Korean Zen Buddhism is distinguished by its adherence to traditions that are said to date from the time of the Buddha. These patterns of practice, organization, and ritual constitute the “eternal return” to the original time of the Buddha. In the sacred setting of the monastery, monks perform a mimesis of the deeds of the Buddha, the spiritual practices transmitted by his teachings, the goal of which is enlightenment (in all of its forms). This primordial orientation is not only temporal, but spatial as well. The Buddha is often shown at the center of mandalas, occupying the sym-

bolic center of the world, sometimes referred to as the world mountain. Tongdo-sa recreates this *imago dei*, transforming the landscape of its sacred mountain<sup>10</sup> into a symbolic center of the cosmos. The multiple hierarchies of Tongdo-sa include an interrelationship of multiple centers, all of which are mediated by the dynamics and the time sequence of the path, a reciprocity of space and form that both separates and joins each realm. At the center of the monastery realm are the Buddha Hall and stupa where the boundaries of time and

space collapse and relationships between self and other—mind and cosmos—are blurred. The mandala as a transformative medium is created in space and time, and the possibility of “crossing over” to realms of enlightenment is made material. 

THOMAS BARRIE, AIA, IS A PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE AT NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY. HE IS AN AWARD-WINNING ARCHITECT AND THE AUTHOR OF *THE SACRED IN-BETWEEN: THE MEDIATING ROLES OF ARCHITECTURE* (ROUTLEDGE, 2010), FROM WHICH THIS ARTICLE IS ADAPTED.

## NOTES

This article is excerpted and adapted from the author’s book *The Sacred In-Between: The Mediating Roles of Architecture*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 113-131.

<sup>1</sup> The three most significant monasteries in Korea are named the Triple Jewels, according to the Buddhist terminology that describes the *Buddha*, *Dhamma* (teachings) and *Sangha* (community of monks). Songgwang-sa, located in Jogyesan Provincial Park in Jeollaman-do Province (in Southwest Korea) was founded in 867 CE and is dedicated to the *Sangha*, the followers of the Buddha. Haein-sa, located in Gayasan National Park in Gyeongsangbuk-do Province (in Southeast Korea) was founded in the 9th century and includes buildings that house wood blocks for printing the Tripitaka Koreana, the Buddhist sutras, rules and commentaries, and therefore is dedicated to the *dhamma*, the teachings of the Buddha. Tongdo-sa, located in Gyeongsangnam-do Province (in Southwest Korea), is dedicated to the Buddha and contains a main hall that looks over a stupa that is believed to contain a bone from the relics of the Sakyamuni Buddha.

<sup>2</sup> The monastery’s atypical orientation was most likely the result of the topography, though all of the main temple buildings face in the auspicious southern direction.

<sup>3</sup> The Bell Pavilion is an essential component of monasteries, where drums, gongs, and bells perform practical and symbolic functions.

<sup>4</sup> The mandala has origins in India and is most closely associated with Tibetan Buddhism. However, other esoteric schools of Buddhism, such as Tendai, also have an extensive tradition of mandala art. Three-dimensional mandalas, though less common, are also found in Tibetan Buddhism, but are not limited to Mahayana Buddhism. Borobudur, located on the island of Java, is a massive architectural mandala where concentric passages lined with serial narrative carvings are traversed by pilgrims. Thomas Barrie, *Spiritual Path – Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual*

*and Meaning in Architecture*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996, pp. 119 – 125.

<sup>5</sup> The *Lotus Sutra*, or *Sutra of the True Dharma (Which Resembles a White Lotus)*, is the most important Mahayana text. Here the Buddha is no longer limited to a historical figure (as in Theravada), but is an omniscient and omnipresent being at the center of a vast cosmic paradise. Within this cosmology, *Bodhisattvas* occupy separate worlds to guide others to enlightenment. The T’ien-T’ai or Lotus School, was a sect founded in China the 6th century CE on the principles of this sutra. See Gyun, H., *Korean Temple Motifs, Beautiful Symbols of the Buddhist Faith*, trans. T. Atkinson, Pajubookcity Munballi Gyoha-eup, Paju-si, Gyeonggi-do: Dolbegae Publishers, 2000, English version 2005, p. 291.

<sup>6</sup> See Gyn, op. cit., pp. 285 - 294.

<sup>7</sup> See Barrie, op. cit., Chapter 6, for a complete discussion of the symbolism of Medieval Japanese Zen Buddhist monasteries.

<sup>8</sup> See Kusan, *The Way of Korean Zen*, trans. M. Bachelor, Boston and London: Weatherhill, 1985, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Lindsay Jones suggests that even though sacred architecture “evokes a range of disparate meanings from the heterogeneous constituency that is experiencing it,” it also can be understood as providing two “overlapping and contradictory codes” that appeal to both “lay” and the “elite” participants and “engender drastically different ‘low’ and ‘high’ (or popular and elite) readings.” Jones, L., *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture, Volume One: Monumental Occasions, Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 31 – 32.

<sup>10</sup> The One-pillar Gate is often called the “mountain gate” and monks entering the monastery are said to “enter the mountains.” See Buswell, R., *The Zen Monastic Experience*, Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 70.