

GORINTO: A UNIQUELY JAPANESE PAGODA

KAMSIN KANEKO DECODES THE SYMBOLISM OF GORINTO LAYER BY LAYER

A board game called *Gorinto* was released a couple of years ago. It offers players the chance to achieve balance, harmony, and understanding by manipulating the elements. The makers of the game ask: “Can you gain the understanding you need to uncover true elemental wisdom?” And while it may be a big ask of a board game, stone monuments, also called *gorinto*, found in Japan from which the game draws its inspiration, have embodied this question since the 12th century.



Gorinto located at the Okunoin cemetery in Koyasan, Wakayama prefecture, Japan. It dates from 1627. Koyasan is an important centre of Shingon Buddhism. Photo credit: Brytta on iStockphoto.

WHAT IS A GORINTO?

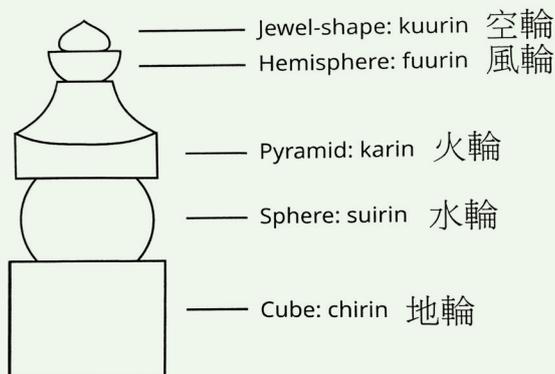
Five-layer stupa, five-element pagoda, five-ring tower or even dharma realm five-wheel pagoda are all terms used in English to explain the Japanese term *gorinto*. Literally, the word breaks down into *go* (five), *rin* (wheel or ring), and *to* (pagoda or tower).

Here I'll use the term five-element pagoda. The word element is on double duty, referring to both the five parts it is made up of and the five elements of the universe. Like the five-element pagoda itself, each of the parts have more than one layer of meaning.

Five-element pagodas are associated with esoteric sects of Japanese Buddhism, particularly the Shingon school of Buddhism. Made up of five layers, each with a different shape stacked on top of each other, they offer a tangible representation of the interconnectedness of all things.

At the base is a cube representing the earth, next is a sphere for water, a pyramid for fire, and fourth is a hemisphere for the wind, and finally the sky is in the shape of a *hoju* (a wish-granting jewel), or a ball.

Five-element pagodas are typically made of stone. There are examples of those made from rock crystal or bronze too. They usually stand between one and three metres tall, although there are some much taller. They are used as reliquaries, meditation aids, and most commonly as grave markers, signifying that people return to the elements when they die. *Gorinto* have been in use for roughly 900 years, originating in around the 12th century.



The five shapes and names in Japanese of the five elements. Image from Wikipedia.

CROSS-CULTURAL ORIGINS OF GORINTO

Five-element pagodas are unique to Japan, but they were influenced by Buddhist monuments that originated in China and before that in ancient India. In the early centuries of the Buddhist faith, first in India and then beyond, relics of the historic Lord Buddha were interred in a type of burial mound known as a stupa.

Stupa were places of worship and devotion for early Buddhist followers and were believed to have mystic power to aid the devotee on his path to enlightenment. Over time, as Buddhism took hold in China, these monuments transformed into the pagoda. Their function also changed and adapted, for example, as libraries for religious texts.

The incorporation of the five elements within the form of the pagoda seems to be a Japanese innovation. But the five elements have their origin directly in the ancient Indian beliefs that gave rise to the Buddhist faith.

The Sanskrit terms for the five elements are often found written on each layer of the five-element pagoda, offering a visible sign of this cross-cultural influence. *Gorintos* where the Japanese characters are used can also be found.

SIMPLE FORM, COMPLEX IDEAS

The shapes that make up the five-element pagoda are deceptively simple. But they represent complex ideas that have been given physical form through geometry. There are more layers of meaning than there is space to talk about here. While I'll focus on the five elements, they also represent other groupings of five found in Buddhist thought, such as the five Buddhas.



Gorinto with the Sanskrit names for the five elements written in Siddham script. Photo credit: Holgs on iStockphoto.



Gorinto with the five elements written in Japanese kanji (Chinese characters), Koyasan, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. Koyasan is considered by many the "home" of gorinto. Image by Erin LaMatter.

From bottom to top, the elements are as follows: *a* (*chi* 地) earth; *va* (*sui* 水) water; *ra* (*ka* 火) fire; *ha* (*fu* 風) wind); and finally, *kha* (*ku/ mu* 空) the Japanese could simply refer to the sky, but it also has the sense of void, emptiness, nothingness. (Sanskrit first, Japanese second.) By bringing them together these five elements represent the entire cosmos.

GORINTO: AID TO MEDITATION AND BECOMING ONE WITH THE COSMOS

While most often used as grave markers, some sects of Japanese Buddhism also used the *gorinto* as an aid to meditation. The elements are correlated to the human body and five *chakras*, or energy centres, in the body.

The earth is located in the lower part of the body, including the legs; water is in the stomach region; fire is in the chest; air in the region of the chest; and the element of void, or ether, is in the crown of the head.

The Buddhist practitioner would meditate on each element in turn, starting at the base and moving up, focusing on the shapes, the Sanskrit words, and the distinct colour, which also represents the elements: yellow, white, red, black, and sky blue, in that order. By doing so, the aim was to identify with the *gorinto*, and so the cosmos and the body of the Dainichi Buddha.

The Dainichi Buddha, also known as Mahavairocana, is an important figure whose radiance extends throughout the cosmos. It is his body that is represented by the form of the five-element pagoda.

CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF GORINTO

Today, *gorinto* are most often found in ancient graveyards, moss-covered and full of the atmosphere and energy of mediaeval Japan. But expressions of this idea have found contemporary forms too.

Contemporary Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto has created modern *Gorinto* in which he incorporates a seascape in the central element of water. The artist says that while he has no Buddhist faith himself, he sees the form as a meditation on the origin of human consciousness. Images of his beautiful *gorinto* can be found on his website.

Finally, wooden grave markers called *sotoba* echo the shapes of *gorinto* and are still in use during Buddhist funeral rites today.

FOR FURTHER READING

<https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/five-elements>
The Symbolism of the Stupa by Adrian Snodgrass



Fig. 284 (above) : A Japanese drawing showing the correlation of the parts of the Stupa of the Five Elements and the *chakras* in the body. The upper pair of hands make the *mudra* of Mahāvairocana in the Diamond World; the lower pair make his *mudra* in the Matrix World. The two small circles drawn in the jewel of the fifth Element, Space (*ākāśa*), correspond to *nirvāna* points and represent the attainment of Enlightenment

An image of the *gorinto* representing the human body and the Dainichi Buddha. Image from *The Symbolism of the Stupa* by Adrian Snodgrass.

KAMSIN KANEKO is a docent at the ACM. She lived in Japan for over fifteen years, where she loved exploring Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines and the rich history and symbolism of the culture.