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# **The Eight Great Places of Buddhist Pilgrimage**

Chan Khoon San

***Sabbadanam dhammadanam jinati.***  
**The Gift of Dhamma excels all gifts.**

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**Cover Design**

Cover shows a close-up photo of the famous Reclining Buddha image inside the Mahaparinibbana Temple in Kushinagar. Its unique facial expression evokes the Bliss of Peace (*santisukha*) as the Buddha enters Mahaparinibbana, the complete liberation from all suffering.

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## About the Author

Bro. Chan Khoon San was born on 8 August 1941 in Penang. Prior to retirement, he worked as a Senior Research Chemist in a large plantation company. He is married with two daughters and three grandchildren.

After retiring from work in 1996, Bro. Chan went to Myanmar to pursue the intensive practice of Satipatthana Vipassana meditation under the guidance of the Most Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa at the Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Centre in Yangon. Until today, he still continues the intensive practice of Satipatthana Vipassana meditation at the Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Centre in Hmawbi every year during the cold season in January.

For the rest of the year, he conducts Sutta classes at various Buddhist societies in the Klang Valley. Since 1991, he has organized eighteen Buddhist pilgrimages to India.

Bro. Chan is the author of seven books on Buddhism, namely:

- (1) 'Buddhism Course',
- (2) 'Buddhist Pilgrimage',
- (3) 'No Hinayana in Buddhism',
- (4) 'The Lotus-like Lay Buddhist',
- (5) 'Shrines and Relics in Buddhism',
- (6) 'Pali Recitation Manual' and
- (7) 'The White Lotus Ascetic'.

The first three books have been translated into Vietnamese, the fourth book into Hindi and Myanmar, and the fifth book into Sinhalese and Bengali.

## Preface

As more and more Buddhists begin to realize the importance of performing a pilgrimage following the Buddha's exhortation, the need for a simple guidebook becomes evident. This present book is a condensed version of my earlier book "Buddhist Pilgrimage New Edition 2009", from which I have extracted those articles describing the Eight Places of Pilgrimage only, and omitting all the other less important sites.

For years, pilgrims have been taught that Vaishali was the place where a monkey offered honey to the Buddha. When I checked the references, I discovered a lot of variation among the different Buddhist traditions concerning the actual locale of this event. The various places given include the Parileyyaka forest near Kosambi, Sravasti, Mathura and Vaishali. To avoid controversy, it is better not to include it in the present book. So I have replaced it with the Buddha's renunciation of the will to live on, which caused a mighty earthquake in Vaishali. This particular event appears in all the Buddhist traditions and there is no doubt about the locale.

I have retained the Introduction, which focuses on the mental aspects of a pilgrimage. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized that the pious disciple should visit the four pilgrimage places and "look upon them with feelings of reverence". Such an attitude distinguishes a true pilgrim from someone who visits the four places for sightseeing like a tourist! So the pilgrim must always keep this objective in mind, which is to show reverence through body, speech and mind when he/she enters the holy shrines. A brief description of famous pilgrims of the past, in particular the earnest monks from China is also retained. It is to remind the modern pilgrim what these brave men had to go through in order to fulfill their desire to visit these holy sites and look upon them with feelings of reverence. Their exemplary conduct and fortitude is a source of inspiration for present day pilgrims to emulate, in order to develop patience and endurance during the journey.

In AN 2.119, the Buddha taught that we should always remember with gratitude those people who have helped us. In line with his admonition, I have also included the sections on “The Decline and Downfall of Buddhism in India” and “The Revival of Buddhism in India” after six centuries of oblivion in its country of origin. The objective is to enable present day pilgrims realize that it was the untiring efforts of the Sangha, archaeologists, historians, scholars and lay devotees, who have contributed to the restoration of our great Buddhist heritage in India and the revival of the Buddha Sasana. The sacrifices and tribulations of the great men who made this possible must be recognized and appreciated. The Buddhist world owe them a debt of gratitude!

To make the descriptions of the various shrines and monuments easier to follow, I have added many photographs and maps to help the pilgrim identify and locate the various places of interest. These photos came from my personal collection, as well as from Dhamma friends who have traveled with me in the course of my eighteen pilgrimages beginning from 1991. To avoid confusion, their modern names are used for the Eight Places of Pilgrimage.

Special thanks to Sis Toh Gaik Hoon for reading the text and making many useful suggestions for improvement.

I am indebted to Bros. Cheng Chong Hua, Tony Quah Seng Hai, Ng Swee Kong, Teo Chiang Khai and Andy Lim Yen Suan for kind permission to use their photographs in this book.

Lastly, I wish all fellow pilgrims a safe, fulfilling and memorable journey.

May all beings be well, happy and peaceful!

With Metta,  
Bro. Chan Khoon San  
Klang, March 2018

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## PART I: Introduction

### 1. Mental Aspects of a Pilgrimage

#### 1.1 A Journey of Faith and Devotion

For the majority of Buddhists, going on a pilgrimage to the holy places mentioned by the Buddha, is a once-a-lifetime undertaking. With so much time, money and effort involved, it is imperative for the intending pilgrim to truly understand what a pilgrimage is all about, especially the mental aspect, since the physical part is normally taken care of by a travel company.

**A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place as an act of faith and devotion.** In the scriptures, faith or *saddha* is the professing of confidence in and the sense of assurance based on understanding that one places on the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. It is not the blind belief based on wrong view. As ignorance is the leader of immoral mental states, so *saddha* is the leader of moral mental states because its chief characteristic is the **purification of the mind.**

Thus the pilgrim is no ordinary tourist who travels for the pleasure of sightseeing and enjoyment. Unlike sensual delights, the sight of the holy shrines do not arouse craving but act as a condition for wholesome mental states to arise in the pilgrim's mind. The Buddha himself advised us to visit those places where he was born, where he attained Enlightenment, where he preached the First Sermon and where he passed into Mahaparinibbana, and look upon them with feelings of reverence.

By showing veneration or reverence at the holy shrines, one is able to purify one's thought, speech and action. In this way, the pilgrim is endowed with the morality of Right Thought, Right

Speech and Right Action. So we can see that visiting the places of pilgrimage with the correct mental attitude can help us in our practice of the Buddha's Teaching.

According to the great Pali commentator, **Ven. Buddhaghosa** the positive feeling resulting from seeing these sites is the religious excitement or the sense of urgency they produce. Another commentator, **Ven. Dhammapala**, explained that this sense of urgency means the mind possesses the knowledge that one should shrink from doing wrong, namely, the knowledge of morality.

## 1.2 Development of the Perfections (*Paramis*)

The second aspect of a pilgrimage is that it is also **an act of renunciation** whereby the pilgrim does not crave for luxury but is contented with simple accommodation, food and transport. This non-greed state of mind enables one to endure any discomfort without complaint but with patience and loving-kindness. In the course of visiting the sacred places, **one feels that one is in the Master's presence** and this fullness of faith conduces to joy and the observance of morality, the foundation of all merit. Many pilgrims take the opportunity to bring with them requisites to perform *dana* out of reverence and gratitude to the Sangha, who take care of the holy places. The holy shrines are also conducive places for pilgrims to reflect on the Buddha's virtues and practise mindfulness to develop wisdom. These are various practices by which one can show veneration at the holy shrines in addition to the normal acts of devotion like the offering of flowers, lights, incense, and worship (*puja*). In the course of the pilgrimage, one will be able to arouse many wholesome factors that cause one's volition to become superior and lead to the accumulation of superior wholesome kamma. Indeed, one can develop the Perfections (*paramis*) and earn much merit when going on a pilgrimage. But it should not end when one has returned home.



After the journey is over, one should always try to recollect the joyful moments spent at holy places to keep them vivid in one's memory. Such recollection is **productive of joy** and is a skilful means of re-enforcing one's good *kamma* already acquired. In times of sickness, fear and worry, or sorrow, one can easily dispel these negative mental states by rejoicing in one's wholesome actions during the pilgrimage.

### 1.3 Taking the Eight Precepts during Pilgrimage

Besides developing faith and performing charity, the pilgrimage is also a suitable time to practice the Buddha's Teaching by cultivating *sila* or morality. This is because morality is the foundation of all meritorious actions without which there can be no act of merit.

Thus many well-informed Buddhists undertake the **Eight Precepts** or *Uposatha Sila* to maintain purity of mind at the Four Places of Pilgrimage, namely: Lumbini, Buddhagaya, Sarnath and Kusinara. However among the less-informed Buddhists, some may prefer to eat vegetarian meals throughout the journey, thinking that it is a form of precept taught by the Buddha to keep oneself pure (as some members are taught to believe by certain proponents of vegetarianism).

As the **Buddha did not advocate vegetarianism** for the Sangha and the laity, it is proper to explain that **keeping Eight Precepts** is far more superior than keeping a vegetarian diet as far as morality (*sila*) is concerned. Of course, some Buddhists may prefer to eat vegetarian food for health or other personal reasons. This is acceptable provided that they understand that it cannot replace the Eight Precepts where a **greater degree of restraint of the senses must be exercised**.

## 1.4 Fellowship and Patience during the Pilgrimage

Fellowship means friendly association, especially with people who share one's interests. For Buddhists, fellowship is important in order to encourage and help one another in the practice of the Buddha's Teachings and to strengthen our faith in times of trial and tribulation. A pilgrimage in a group to the Four Holy Places is one of the best ways to cultivate Buddhist fellowship. Over the course of the journey, members of the group will have the opportunity to interact closely and get to know each other well under conditions where loving-kindness (*metta*), appreciative joy (*mudita*), generosity (*dana*) and faith (*saddha*) prevail.

It is easy to be cool and nice when conditions are favorable. What about times when things don't turn out to expectations, such as delays in flight schedule, breakdown of vehicle and arriving very late at the destination, malfunction of the air-conditioner in the bus causing rising temperatures or insufficient hotel rooms in spite of confirmed bookings? For ladies traveling in India, the biggest problem is the lack of public toilets. The bus driver will have to look for one in a petrol station and the ladies will have to form a long queue while the men do it behind the bushes. So the pilgrim must be mentally prepared to put up with all sorts of difficulties and inconveniences and this requires a lot of patience. Otherwise anger will arise and defile our minds even while we are performing a holy pilgrimage! In such trying times, we should remind each other of the Buddha's advice in Dhammapada Verse 184: **"The best moral practice is patience and forbearance."**

## 1.5 Arousing Religious Urgency during Pilgrimage

According to the Scriptures, the Four Holy Places of pilgrimage are called *Samvejaniya-thana*, or places that will **arouse awareness and apprehension** of the nature of impermanence, the first of the three characteristics of existence.

Thus skillful pilgrims take the opportunity of a pilgrimage to arouse religious urgency (*samvega*) by reflecting on the last words of the Buddha before he entered *Parinibbana*: “Indeed, *bhikkhus*, I declare this to you: It is the nature of all conditioned things to perish. **Accomplish all your duties with mindfulness.**”

The Four Holy Places were once great centres associated with the Buddha, Dhamma and famous arahant disciples of the Sangha. One reads in the Pali scriptures about the glory of Buddha’s Birth at Lumbini, his Enlightenment at Bodhgaya, the First Sermon at Deer Park, Sarnath and his Parinibbana at Kushinagar. Today the Buddha and the great arahants are no longer around, for even the Enlightened One and great arahants have to succumb to sickness, old age and death. Thus **the world of living beings** (*satta-loka*) does not remain constant but is subject to change according to the Law of Impermanence. One becomes truly apprehensive when one reflects on this, and it arouses the **religious urgency** (*samvega*) to practise the Noble Eightfold Path in order to realize Nibbana, the cessation of all suffering.

After Lord Buddha’s Parinibbana, his devotees all over India built stupas and viharas to commemorate important events of the Buddha at these places. Thus we read about the 84,000 stupas built by King Asoka to honour 84,000 Dhamma-khandas (Groups of Teachings) and monuments built by Buddhist kings of various dynasties to honour the Buddha. Today the pilgrim has to travel long distances over poor road conditions to remote areas in north India only to see the vestiges and ruins of these once glorious monuments, that have been damaged or destroyed over time.

One becomes aware that the **conditioned world** (*sankhara-loka*) and **natural world** (*okasa-loka*) do not remain constant but are subject to changes according to the Law of Impermanence. One becomes truly apprehensive when one reflects on this. It arouses the religious urgency (*samvega*) to practise the Noble Eightfold Path in order to realize Nibbana, the cessation of all suffering.

## 2. The Four Places of Pilgrimage

The idea of a pilgrimage came from the Buddha himself over 2500 years ago! In answer to his attendant, Venerable Ananda's concern that the *bhikkhus* (monks) would no longer be able to see the Blessed One to pay their respects and seek inspiration (to practice the Teachings) after his demise, the Buddha advised pious disciples to visit Four Places, the sight of which will inspire *saddha* (faith accompanied by mental purity) and *samvega* (religious urgency). This is because they arouse the awareness and apprehension of impermanence (*anicca*), the first of the three characteristics of existence. What are the Four Places?

(i) Place of Birth, **Lumbini** in Nepal: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

(ii) Place of Enlightenment, **Bodhgaya** in Bihar, India: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

(iii) Place of First Sermon, **Sarnath** in Uttar Pradesh, India: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

(iv) Place of Decease (Mahaparinibbana), **Kushinagar** near Kasia in Uttar Pradesh, India: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

"And whosoever, Ananda, should die on such a pilgrimage, with his heart established in faith, he at the breaking up of the body, after death, will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness."  
(Digha Nikaya, Sutta 11, Mahaparinibbana Sutta)

## 2.1 The Four Places of Miracles, with Vaishali as the Place where Buddha Renounced the Will to Live on

Gradually the basic four pilgrimage places (Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar) were increased in terms of the great events of Buddha's life to eight by adding four more places traditionally considered to be places of four principal miracles he performed.

(i) **Sravasti** in Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha performed the Twin Miracle to silence the heretics, after which he ascended to Tavatimsa Heaven to preach to his mother.

(ii) **Sankasia** in Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha descended from Heaven accompanied by Brahma and Sakka, after preaching to his mother for three months.

(iii) **Rajgir** in Bihar, where Buddha tamed the drunken elephant, Nalagiri.

(iv) **Vaishali** in Bihar: The miracle of the offering honey by a monkey to the Buddha is replaced by the Buddha's renunciation of the will to live on, which caused a mighty earthquake, a truly great event in the Buddha's life.

There are a lot of contradictory claims regarding the locale of the honey offering. According to Dhammapada Commentary Book 1:5b, the offering of honey to the Buddha by a monkey took place in the **Parileyakka forest** near Kosambi. Prior to that, the Buddha was residing in the Ghositarama, where a dispute arose among the monks that caused a lot of quarreling. Although the Buddha tried to unite them three times, the quarrelsome monks refused to listen to his admonitions. Finally the Buddha left Kosambi without informing anyone in the monastery and traveled alone until he arrived at the village of Parileyakka. There at the foot of a beautiful Sala tree in the forest, the Buddha spent the tenth rainy season attended to by the elephant Parileyakka.

Now a certain monkey saw the elephant up and about every day performing the minor duties like sweeping the Sala tree area, getting drinking water for the Buddha with a water-pot, etc. So he decided to do something too. One day he saw a honeycomb on a stick, free from flies. He broke off the stick, took the honeycomb and placed it on a banana leaf. Then he offered his gift to the Buddha. The Buddha took the honey, sat down but did not eat the honey. The monkey was watching and wondered why the Blessed One did not eat the honey. So he took the stick of honeycomb and as he was examining it carefully, saw that there were some insect's eggs. So he gently removed the eggs and again offered the honey to the Buddha. Then the Buddha ate the honey.

Filled with joy that the Buddha had eaten the honey, the monkey leapt from branch to branch dancing about gleefully. But a branch broke and he lost his grasp, falling on a tree stump and was impaled. So he died. But because of his faith and dana, he was reborn as a deva in Tavatimsa with a retinue of celestial nymphs.

The Dhammapada Commentary version of the monkey's offering of honey to the Buddha is slightly different from similar stories found in various **Chinese and Tibetan sources**. In the Tibetan version, which occurred in **Jetavana, Sravasti**, the monkey takes the Buddha's bowl and uses it to collect the honey from a tree. He dies not by falling from a tree and impaling himself on a tree stump but by falling into a pit. Rather than being reborn as a deva, he is reborn as a human being, who becomes a monk. A Sanskrit version of this story can be found in the *Sanghabhedavastu* of the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya (SbhV ii, 47-49). This monkey's gift of honey became one of the four great miracles of the Buddha's life. (Reference: Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination by Reiko Ohnuma).

**Xuanzang** recorded two similar episodes about monkeys, which took place in two different locations. The first account is located in **Mathura** (Si-Yu-Ki, Part I, p.182). He says that there is a great

dry marsh, beside which is a stupa. Here a monkey offered a pot of honey to the Buddha, who ordered it to mix it with water and distribute it among the monks. After completing the act, the monkey filled with joy, fell into a deep hole and died.

In his second account located at the Kutagarasala in **Vaishali**, he says: “To the south of the stone pillar is a tank. This was dug by a band of monkeys (Markatahrada) for Buddha’s use. Not far to the south of this tank is a stupa; it is here that the monkeys, taking the alms-bowl of Tathagata, climbed a tree and gathered him some honey. Not far to the south is a stupa; this is the place where the monkeys offered honey to the Buddha. At the north-west of the lake there is still a figure of a monkey.” (Si-Yi-Ki, Part II, p.68)

The story of the monkey offering honey to the Buddha is well known among all the Buddhist traditions. It appears to have been derived from an earlier common source. However, there is so much difference with respect to the actual location, it is better to leave it out of this book in order to avoid controversy.

Among the events in the Buddha’s life when great earthquakes shook the earth, the first took place when the Bodhisatta descended from Tusita heaven and entered the mother’s womb. Three more followed, one each in Lumbini, Bodhgaya and Sarnath at his Birth, Enlightenment and Preaching of the First Sermon respectively. The fifth earthquake occurred at the Capala shrine in Vaishali after the Buddha renounced the will to live on, three months before Parinibbana. The sixth earthquake took place when the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana at Kushinagar.

The particular event at Vaishali is recorded in the canonical literature of all the Buddhist traditions. There is no question about the locale. Vaishali certainly deserves to be included among the Four Places of Miracles because of the Buddha’s renunciation of the will to live on, not because of the offering of honey by a monkey, whose locale is doubtful.

## 2.2 The Stupa as the Supreme Object of Worship

The word stupa (Pali: thupa), derived from the root ‘stup’ (‘to heap’) is a mound or tumulus. Originally they were graves containing the ashes and charred remains of the dead after cremation. For poor folk in ancient India, the corpses or remains of the pyre were left to rot or be eaten by animals in the charnel ground. However for rich or famous persons and spiritual leaders (non-Brahmanic), their ashes were buried under a stupa. Stupas were erected in cemeteries or on private ground; in cases of special honor, at a crossroads. (Buddhist India by Rhys Davids)

Before the Buddha passed away he gave instructions on how his body should be cremated, and a stupa raised at a crossroads to enshrine the ashes. *“And whoever lays wreaths or makes offerings, will reap the benefits and happiness for a long time.”*

The Buddha mentioned that there are four persons worthy of a stupa, viz: a Supremely Enlightened Buddha, a *Pacceka* Buddha, a Noble disciple and a Universal monarch.

“Why is the Buddha worthy of a stupa? Because at the thought: *“This is the stupa of the Bhagava, Arahant, Supremely Enlightened One!”* the hearts of many people will be calmed and made happy; so calmed and with their minds established in faith, they at the breaking up of the body will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness.” (Mahaparinibbana Sutta, V, 26-31)

### Four Types of Stupas

Buddhist stupas may be categorized into four types, namely:

#### (a) Saririka or Relic Stupa

These stupas contain the **corporeal relics** of the Buddha, the Chief Disciples, Buddhist teachers and saints. Stupas containing



the relics of the Buddha, which are considered the **most sacred** objects of worship, are usually very large and grand, as they have been enlarged and renovated several times by successive Buddhist kings of India. According to legend, Emperor Asoka broke into seven of the original eight relic stupas (Ramagama stupa was left intact), took a major portion of the Buddha's relics and distributed them in 84,000 stupas all over his empire. As a result, one can still see many of these stupas in India, such as the Dhammarajika stupa in Sarnath, which once enshrined the Buddha's relics.

### **(b) Paribhogika Stupa**

These stupas are built over **sacred objects used** by Buddha, e.g., his robe, water-pot, razor and needle-case.

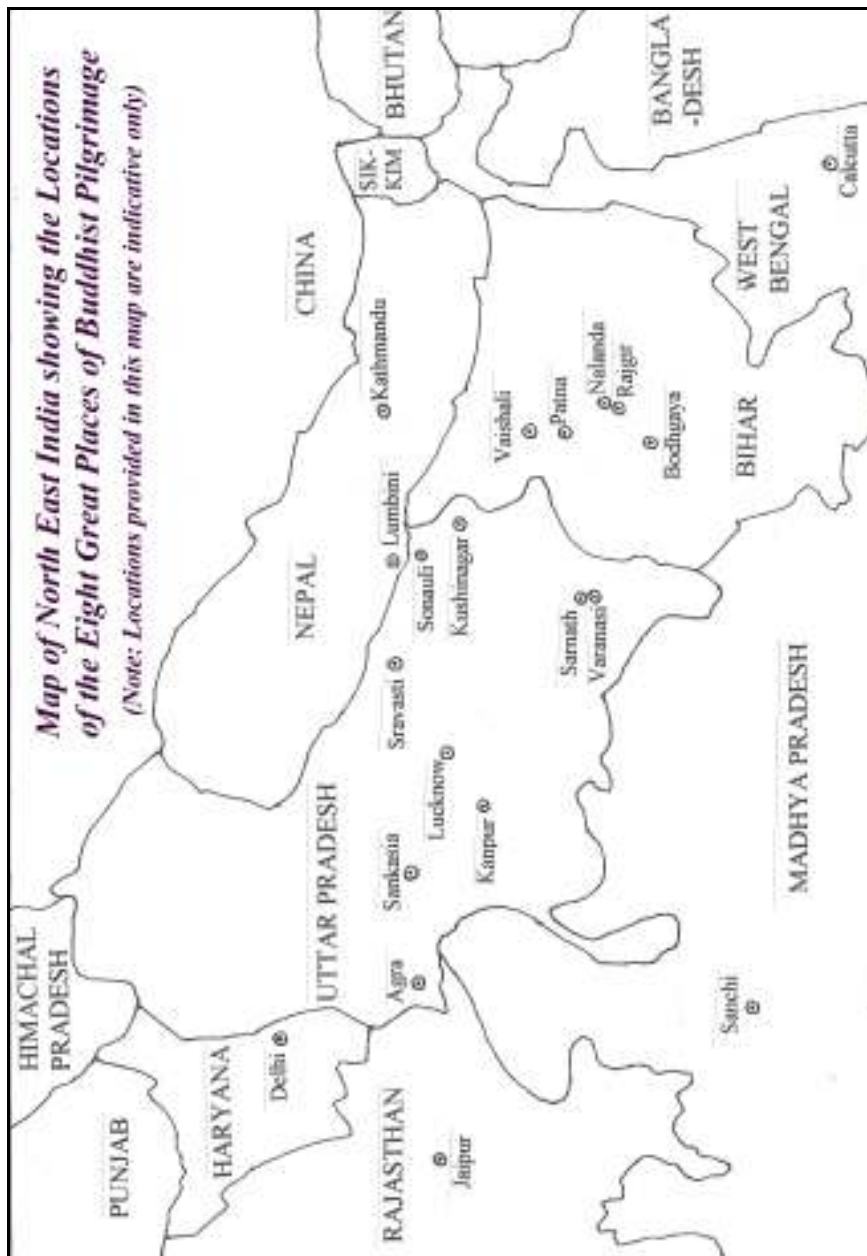
### **(c) Uddesika or Memorial Stupa**

These stupas were built to commemorate important events in the Buddha's life, including those of his previous births or spots hallowed by his presence. A good example is the Asoka Stupa in the village of Bakraur commemorating the offering of milk rice by Lady Sujata to the Bodhisatta prior to his Enlightenment.

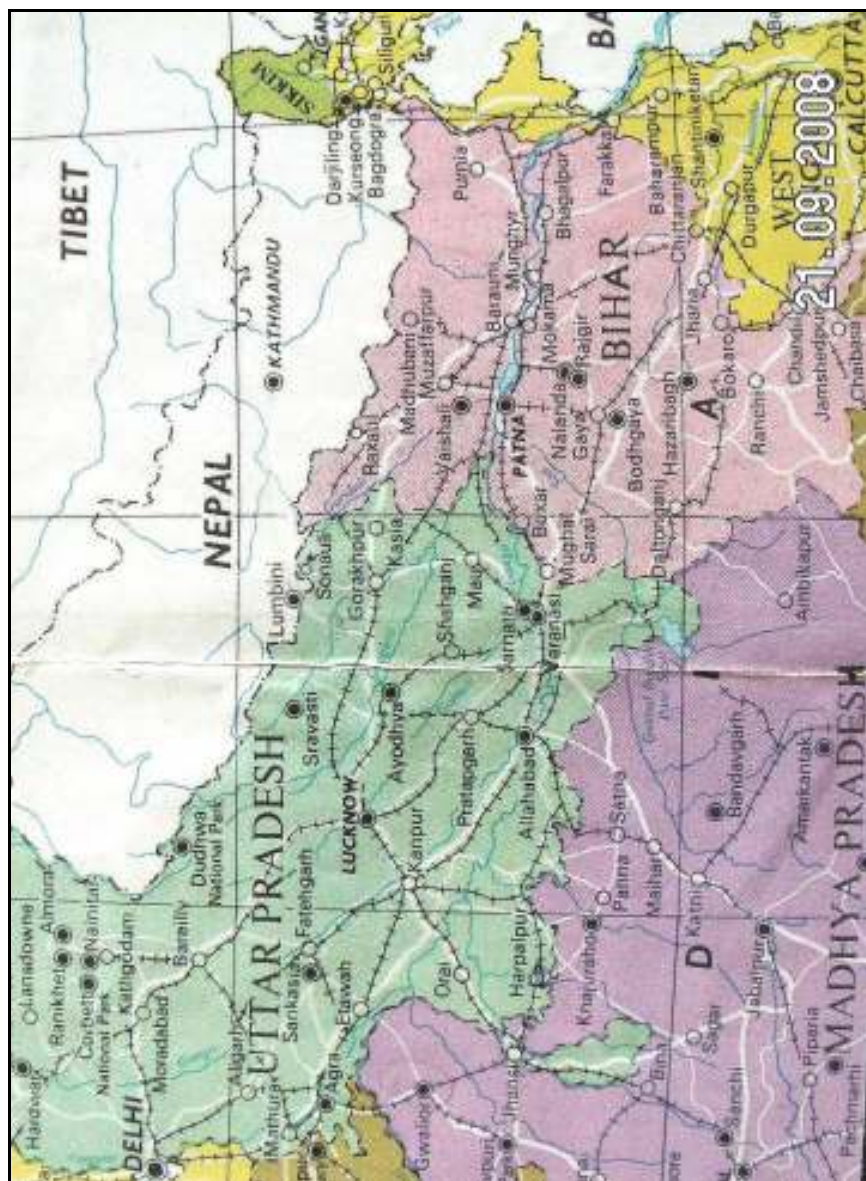
### **(d) Votive Stupas**

These are usually small stupas erected at sacred sites by devotees mainly as an **offering** for attaining religious merit. The most number of votive stupas can be seen at the four places of pilgrimage, namely: (i) Lumbini, surrounding the site where the Buddha was born; (ii) Bodhgaya, surrounding the Bodhi tree where the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment; (iii) Deer Park in Sarnath, where the Buddha preached the First Sermon; (iv) Kushinagar surrounding the Mahaparinibbana Temple where the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana. Besides these places, votive stupas are also erected around relic stupas, as the latter are considered supreme objects of worship.

### 2.3 Map of India showing the Eight Places of Pilgrimage



## 2.4 Tourist Map of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh showing the Principal Towns around the Eight Places of Pilgrimage



## 2.5 Mental Attitude When Visiting the Holy Shrines

It is imperative for the pilgrim to realize that the principal purpose of the pilgrimage is to honour the Buddha. Therefore when visiting the holy shrines, we should show proper respect. The Buddha is the King of Dhamma (*Dhammaraja*) and we should approach the shrine as we would approach the presence of a king. Hence we should not engage in taking photographs excitedly, or look here and there treating the visit like a sightseeing tour or engage in frivolous talk but remain calm and serene in sense faculties. We should walk mindfully, head down and with palms clasped together in reverence maintaining noble silence or mentally reciting the virtues of the Buddha. As we enter the shrine, we should focus our mind as if we are entering the court of the *Dhammaraja*. Finally we should pay homage (*pūja*) by taking refuge in the Triple Gem followed by Five or Eight Precepts and reciting the Virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. This is the proper way in which a pious disciple should visit the holy places and look upon them with feelings of reverence.

## 3. Famous Pilgrims of the Past

The four pilgrimage places and four places of miracles are known as *Atthamahathanani* or the **Eight Great Places**. Emperor Asoka called a visit to these eight shrines “*dhammayatra*” (dhamma expedition) or a pilgrimage of piety. On the twentieth year of his reign in 249 BC, he heeded the exhortation of the Buddha and embarked on a holy pilgrimage visiting all these eight places. His pilgrimage was literally a ‘landmark’ journey because wherever he went he built stupas and raised stone pillars with inscriptions to commemorate his visit to these holy places. These towering monolithic pillars made of polished sandstone and topped with animal capitals have helped to identify the exact locations of the Buddhist world’s most sacred places even after they fell into ruins following the downfall of Buddhism in India.

Today after over two millenia, many of these Asokan pillars still stand testifying to his faith and devotion. Modern day pilgrims can still see these pillars in Lumbini, Vaishali and Lauriya Nandangarh, the famous Lion Capital at Sarnath Museum and Elephant Capital at Sankasia. Thereafter, succeeding Buddhist kings, queens, nobles and rich people followed King Asoka's example. As a result, the landscape of northern India became studded with Buddhist monuments, shrines and temples. In fact, the state of Bihar derived its name from the word "vihar", which means "monastery" because the area was full of monasteries.

From China came the devout and earnest Buddhist monks, like Faxian, Xuanzang and many others, who traveled great distances braving immense hardships, perils, and even death to fulfill their desire to visit the holy places. In the Kao-seng-chuan (Chinese Monks in India by I-Ching), another pilgrim, I-Ching, described how he had to pass many days without food, even without a drop of water and wondered how the other travellers, under such difficult conditions, could keep up their morale and spirit. On the long, long trek, many died from sheer physical exhaustion or sickness and some had to leave their bones in desert-sands or somewhere out in India. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, they never faltered nor wavered, such was their indomitable spirit and desire to gaze on the sacred vestiges of their religion. Never did men endure greater suffering by desert, mountain and sea and exhibited such courage, religious devotion and power of endurance! (Note: Modern day pilgrims should try to emulate the exemplary conduct of these ancient pilgrims in order to develop **patience and endurance** during their journey to the holy places.)

The pioneer among them was **Faxian**. He took five years to walk from the Western border of China across the Taklamakan desert, one of the most hostile environments on this planet, and over the windswept passes of the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountain ranges to Northern India. After spending six years in India, he sailed to Sri Lanka, where he spent two more years. His homeward journey

by sea took another year in which he stopped for five months in Java. Faxian left an account of his journey of AD 399-414 in the Fo-kwo-ki (Record of the Buddhist Country).

One hundred years after Faxian, two monks, Sung Yun and Hui Sheng of Loyang, were sent by the Empress Dowager of the Northern Wei dynasty to obtain Buddhist books from India. They started out in AD 518 and after reaching as far as Peshawar and Nagarahara (Jalalabad), returned to China in AD 521. Sung Yun left a short narrative of his travels but Hui Sheng did not record any detail of the journey.

Undoubtedly the most renowned Chinese pilgrim was the great Tipitaka master, Xuanzang, who secretly set out on the long journey to the West in AD 629 at the age of twenty-seven. His travel in India was the most extensive, taking almost seventeen years (AD 629-645). When he returned to China, the T'ang Emperor T'ai Tsung bestowed upon him great ovation and public honour. Xuanzang's record of his travels, known as Ta-T'ang-Si-yü-ki (Record of the Western World), is a detailed and romantic account of the Buddhist shrines in India and other countries he passed through. His devotion, piety and love for learning became a source of inspiration to his contemporaries and later generation of pilgrims including **I-Ching** (Chinese: **Yijing**), who took the sea route to India and back. His travels covered the period AD 671-695 in which he spent ten years studying in Nalanda and another ten years in Sri-vijaya, Sumatra translating the scriptures. He wrote his account in the Nan-hai-ki-kuei-nai-fa-chuan (Record of the Inner Law sent home from the South Sea).

The records of these Chinese pilgrims are the only available writings describing the condition of Buddhism and the Buddhist sites, as they existed at that time. These records have proven to be invaluable in locating their ruins during excavations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Sir Alexander Cunningham and others.

## 4. The Decline and Downfall of Buddhism in India

Buddhism in India suffered two extensive devastations in its history. The first was by the Hephthalites or White Huns, who invaded India in 470-480 AD and conquered the border provinces of Gandhara and Kashmir. The Hun king, **Mihirakula** was a barbarian bent on destroying the Buddhist establishment. The conquest was accomplished with great ferocity and the Gupta regime was completely extinguished. It was not until around 530 AD that Mihirakula was defeated by Yasodharman of Mandasor. Xuanzang who passed through Gandhara and Kashmir 100 years later heard about the devastation and reported that in Gandhara alone, “*Mihirakula overthrew stupas and destroyed monasteries, altogether one thousand and six hundred foundations.*”

At that age, Buddhism had enough vitality to heal the wounds inflicted by the Huns for over a decade. Sangha life picked up again in new monasteries built over the ruins of the demolished ones. However, in the western part of India, namely: Gandhara, Kashmir and western Uttar Pradesh, Buddhism had lost much ground to Brahmanism of the Gupta age. In the eastern part, in Magadha (Bihar) and West Bengal, it began to revive again under the Buddhist king, **Harsa Vardhana** (7<sup>th</sup> century AD) and later on, under the patronage of the **Pala kings** (8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century AD).

This was a period when the viharas underwent transformation from being monastic training centers to larger institutions or mahaviharas dedicated to learning and scholarship. Some of these mahaviharas such as **Nalanda** had as many as 10,000 students from every Buddhist country. Kings, nobles and wealthy people all contributed their share towards the maintenance of these famous universities. Their financial support made these Buddhist institutions famous and prosperous but they undermined the high ideals of renunciation and simple lifestyle upon which the Sangha was founded.

Although Buddhism was taught, mundane subjects including astronomy, medicine (*Ayurveda*), grammar, metaphysics, logic, philosophy of language, classical Hindu and non-Indian philosophy were all regularly studied. So the monks slowly became accustomed to an easy life devoted to academic pursuits and religious rituals and relaxed their moral code to accommodate worldly practices and beliefs. According to I-Ching who studied in Nalanada from 675-85 AD, “the venerable and learned priests of Nalanda monastery ride in sedan-chairs when they travel. The necessary baggage are carried by their attendants; such are the customs among the Bhikshus in India”. Such easy lifestyles & wealth contributed to the disintegration of the Order into diverse sects, to a weakening of morality and corresponding erosion of the laity’s faith in the Sangha.

The Mahayana doctrine had reached the stage where arahantship was openly condemned and Bodhisattaship held up as the goal towards which every good Buddhist should aim for. With the passage of time, more philosophical speculations in the Mahayana tradition emerged and led to the worship of various Mahayanist gods and “Bodhisattas” conceived to symbolize the philosophical speculations. As time went on, converts to Mahayana, who were well acquainted with the Hindu deities of the day, conveniently adopted many Hindu deities into the Buddhist pantheon. These Hindu deities were represented as “Bodhisattas” in order to reconcile the two faiths and to attract more devotees. To convince the naive devotees that it was indeed a Buddhist deity, each icon had a small Buddha image on its head.

Grand temples were built in honor of these new “Bodhisattas”. Elaborate ceremonies were performed attracting people from all walks of life and encouraged different superstitious beliefs and modes of worship. These practices formed the basis for the development of **Tantrayana** by Buddhists who adopted the methods of Hindu Tantrists by incorporating Vedic and Hindu beliefs into the religion.



During the later part of the Pala period (9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century AD), Buddhism became heavily adulterated by the Tantric cult, with its magic spells, yoga and practices that were completely alien to the earlier form of Buddhism. The religion was now reduced into an esoteric yogic system with emphasis in the efficacy of magic spells and mantras and practice of mudras (physical postures), mandalas (mystical diagrams), kriyas (rites), etc. Tantric mystics were accepted as great leaders who claimed to have discovered the shortest route to Deliverance. In some quarters, it was believed that the “grace of the teacher” was sufficient for the realization of the Sublime. The highly symbolic language of esoteric Tantric writers encouraged some of these gurus to ridicule the monastic code and even propagate mass indulgence in wine and women as a way to attain the highest knowledge.



**Left:** Avalokiteshvara Padmapani, 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century AD, Bengal Exhibited at Delhi Museum



**Right:** Tantric deity Marici found at Nalanda ruins. Dept. of Archaeology, India

The discovery in the ruins of Nalanda of several Tantric images, all of which belonged to the Pala period of its history, provides evidence of the development of Tantrayana at Nalanda University.

According to **Ven. Jagdish Kashyap**, the religion had become so polluted and weakened by these perverted forms of practice that its revival was practically impossible after the Mahayana/Tantra temples and monasteries were destroyed by the Muslim invaders.

**Below:** Photo of sculpture at Nalanda Museum entitled “TRAILOKYA VIJAYA” shows the lower portion of a vandalized sculpture of a Vajrayana Buddhist deity represented trampling the Hindu god Shiva and his consort Gauri to show the supremacy over Hindu pantheon.



## 4.1 The Fatal Blow

The Turuskas or Khaliji Turks from Afghanistan dealt the fatal blow to Buddhism in India at the close of the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. They were fanatical Muslims, bent on conquest and destruction. By then, they had conquered the western part of Uttar Pradesh, where they had settled themselves with expansionist aims. Soon they began their invasion, spreading terror and panic through all the towns and countryside in their path, and their advance posed a tremendous threat to all monasteries and temples of northern India. The whole doomed area in the east, ancient Magadha (Bihar) and North Bengal, fell to the marauders. Especial ferocity was directed towards Buddhist institutions with huge Buddha and “Bodhisatta” images, which were systematically plundered, destroyed or vandalised. The shaven-headed monks wearing distinctive monastic robes were easily spotted and massacred wholesale as idolaters (most of them were **Tantric followers**). Such was the savagery of the Muslim invaders!

In 1684, after nearly five centuries of oppression, the Indians united under the **Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji** (Mumbai Airport is named after him) and were able to end Muslim rule in India. The decisive point for us is that Turkish power and Muslim rule had collapsed, the Marathas had re-established religious tolerance over most of India and the British continued this Maratha policy over a still wider area. It became possible for Buddhists not only to make pilgrimages to India but also to start restoring Bodhgaya, Sarnath and other holy shrines and once more to build temples for the monks to stay. In fact, the demise of Muslim rule and the arrival of the British Raj were the most significant events that paved the way for the revival of Buddhism in India.

## 5. The Revival of Buddhism in India

The disappearance of Buddhism in India lasted six centuries, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. According to **Ven. Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap**, it was almost so complete that even in recent times, the local people of Patna, Rajgir and Mathura, once the strongholds of Buddhism, could not even recognize the Buddhist relics that were discovered there. While in many places, the Buddha statues that were not destroyed came to be worshipped as Hindu deities. Buddhist stupas that had been abandoned for centuries became so overgrown with wild vegetation and trees that they resembled hillocks!

After six centuries of darkness, light dawn on Buddhism with the coming of the **British Raj** in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that attracted a crop of scholars and explorers. These newcomers from the West were filled with enthusiasm to discover what lay hidden in this ancient country. Asokan pillars towering in the open were the first monuments that came under their scrutiny. Their discoveries began in 1750 with the discovery of fragments of an Asokan inscription of the Delhi-Mirath Pillar, followed by inscriptions on the Delhi-Topra Pillar, the Allahabad-Kosambi Pillar and Lauriya Araraj and Lauriya Nandangarh Pillars, the last two in Bihar.

With the discovery of these ancient inscriptions, the next task was to find out what was written and who was the author. But there was no Indian scholar competent enough to decipher them. In 1837, **James Princep**, an official of the Indian Mint and Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal succeeded after several years of painstaking study and hard work, in deciphering the inscriptions, which were written in **Brahmi**. He published his results containing English translations of the seven pillar Edicts, the opening words of which were: “*Thus spake the beloved of gods, King Piyadasi*”

Who this King Piyadasi was still remained a mystery. Luckily that year, **George Turnour**, historian and officer of the Ceylon Civil Service, published his English translation of **Mahavamsa**, a Pali chronicle of Ceylon. The occurrence of the word ‘Piyadasi’ in the Mahavamsa helped Prinsep in identifying King Piyadasi as the great Buddhist **Emperor Asoka**. The deciphering of the Asokan inscriptions and the identification of Asoka was an epoch-making event. It revealed that India during Asoka’s time was **Buddhist India!** Obviously the Brahmins who wrote India’s history had intentionally omitted that golden period. This discovery enriched the history of India and of Buddhism to such an extent that all previous books on Indian history had to be re-written!

## 6. The Pioneers of Buddhist Revival in India

The arrival of **Sir Alexander Cunningham** (1814 -1893) accelerated the discovery and restoration of the archaeological sites in India. He was the first Director General of Archaeology and undoubtedly the greatest explorer of Buddhist heritage in India. He came to India in 1833 and served in the army and other government departments in India and Burma as an engineer. He took up archaeology because he had an innate concern for ancient remains, and was deeply disturbed by the way the monuments were suffering from the ravages of nature and the plunder of man. His association with Buddhist monuments began when he undertook excavation of the Dhamek stupa in Sarnath around 1840 where he saw the irreparable damage of its beautiful facade due to the meanness **Jagat Singh**, minister of Benares. His achievements as an archaeologist during a span of 28 years led to his appointment as Surveyor of Indian Archaeology in 1861. That same year a French scholar, **M. Stanisla Julien**, had published a translation of the travel records of the famous Chinese pilgrim **Xuanzang** who was in India in 629-644 AD.

Following the descriptions of cities, places and land routes recorded by the Chinese pilgrims **Faxian** and **Xuanzang** in their travels, Cunningham initiated a systematic survey of the archaeological remains of northern India that resulted in the discovery of several ancient Buddhist sites such as **Kushinagar**, **Sankasia**, **Sravasti**, **Nalanda**, **Kosambi** and many others that had become obscured with time. In 1865, the department was abolished but revived in 1870, with **Cunningham as Director**, the post he held until he retired in 1885. During his retirement in London until his death in 28 November 1893, he wrote several books on Buddhism based on his findings. His contribution to the restoration of Buddhist Heritage in India is unrivalled. **Buddhists in particular owe him a special debt.**

While Cunningham dedicated himself to the restoration of Buddhist heritage sites, another person who dedicated his life to reclaiming them back to Buddhists was **Anagarika Dharmapala** (1865-1933), pioneer of the Buddhist revival-movement in India. Born in Sri Lanka by the name of **David Hewavitarana**, he later took the name of Anagarika Dharmapala, which means “Homeless Guardian of the Dhamma”. Dharmapala came to Bodhgaya in 1891 after reading several articles written by **Sir Edwin Arnold**, author of the “Light of Asia”, describing the deplorable condition of the Mahabodhi Temple, the most sacred place of worship of Buddhists. What he saw shocked and saddened him so deeply that he vowed to devote his life “*to make this sacred spot to be cared for by our own bhikkhus*”.

Realizing that it would not be an easy task to accomplish unless the message of the Buddha spread, he founded the **Maha Bodhi Society of India** to spearhead the movement. This started the process that generated considerable interest about the rich heritage of Buddhism, which had nearly become extinct in the country of its origin. Starting at Bodhgaya, where the battle to regain control of the **Mahabodhi Temple** began, the Maha Bodhi

Society expanded its activities to Sarnath, venue of the First Sermon.

When Anagarika Dharmapala came to India in 1891, Sarnath had been reduced to a tiny village surrounded by jungle, which was the grazing ground of wild pigs. Dharmapala decided to restore it into a living shrine, by building a new vihara beside the famous Deer Park. With the completion of the **Mulagandha Kuti Vihara** in 1931, and the subsequent establishment of the Maha Bodhi Society Library, Free Clinic, Schools and Teachers Training College, Pilgrims' Hostel and Sangharama, Sarnath is once again pulsating with life.

Another great personality who was a friend in need was the famous archeologist, **Sir John Marshall**, Director General of Archeological Survey of India 1902-1928, best known for his discovery of Indus Valley Civilization at Harappa and Mohenjodaro and his excavations of Taxila which lasted twenty years. In 1925, when the Indian Government decided to stop the construction of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara on the grounds that it was too near the Dhamekh Stupa, the Maha Bodhi Society appealed for his help. A meeting was held in Taxila (near Islamabad) between Sir John Marshall, **Devapriya Valisinha**, secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society and **Dr. C. A. Hewavitarne** younger brother of Anagarika, in which the Sarnath Vihara building in question was discussed. As a result of the intervention of Sir John Marshall, the dispute was amicably settled in 1926 with an offer of an alternative plot of land for the Vihara by the Indian Government, financial compensation of expenditure incurred on earlier foundation works and 20 acres of land to be developed into a park at their cost as an annexe to the Vihara.

With its headquarters in Calcutta, the Maha Bodhi Society has expanded its activities to many cities in India, as well as overseas in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, England and USA. The impact of the expanding activities of the Maha Bodhi Society was

soon felt throughout India spurring millions of low caste Hindus to embrace Buddhism, following the example of their leader **Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar**, Champion of the Depressed Castes of India, who chose **Sayadaw U Chandramani** of Kusinara to be his mentor in a historic ceremony on 14 October 1956 in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The Nagpur event was the greatest religious conversion in the history of mankind. It opened the floodgates for the masses of low-caste Hindus to enter the fold of Buddhism and escape the scourge of the caste system, as each year more and more low-caste Hindus embrace Buddhism swelling the Buddhist population to about 50 million today according to estimates by Buddhist scholars.

Among the Sangha members, the most prominent was **Sayadaw U Chandramani** of Kusinara, mentor of the famous Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar. He possessed all the necessary qualities, such as wisdom, patience, courage, stamina and untiring effort to rebuild the Buddha Sasana in India, and to develop it in Nepal, and to carry on teaching and practising both Vipassana and Loving Kindness meditation. In addition to his Dhammaduta activities, he took a keen interest in the education of the young people of Kushinagar because he knew that any change of mindset would have to come from the younger generation.

As Kushinagar is world famous as the final resting place of the Buddha, many pilgrims as well as tourists make it a point to visit the Burmese Temple to pay their respects to Sayadaw, who was always concerned about the welfare of the pilgrims. While doing all that, he passed away in the Kusinara Burmese Temple on 8 May 1972 at the age of 97, having lived nearly 80 years as a Bhikkhu in India serving the cause of the Sasana with great determination and patience, despite all the hardships he faced including a very poor diet, poor living conditions and a hostile environment. To all his devotees, especially in India and Nepal, they could never again find such a great missionary. **He was truly the Hero of the Sasana in India.**



Gradually, all the Pilgrimage sites were restored and developed as religious-cum-tourist resorts. Most of them have regained much of their lost glory and are pulsating with life, thanks to the concerted efforts of the Sangha, archeologists, historians, scholars and lay devotees in their restoration. In particular, the **Burmese and Sri Lankan Buddhists** have played a crucial role by building viharas to accommodate the Sangha so that the bhikkhus can act as custodians of the holy shrines and enhance the sanctity of the environment. Many of the shrines are located in rural areas that lack basic amenities, and the monks there play a useful role in promoting the education and welfare of the local population.

Once again, they are living shrines, worthy of worship and veneration to which thousands of devotees come every year from all over the world to pay homage to the Greatest Teacher the world has ever known, the Lord Buddha, and earn merit by this pilgrimage of piety and faith. A visit to these repositories of glorious Buddhist heritage will certainly uplift the mind and enable one to develop many noble qualities. The sight of fellow pilgrims, who come from far and wide, with the common aim of honoring the Blessed One, will surely arouse joy in one's heart.

For the disciple who has completed this journey of piety and faith, the **spiritual impact is unique and unforgettable**. In fact, the sights of these holy shrines impact so deeply in the mind that the pilgrim will always remember these revered images with joy long after the journey. All devout Buddhists should heed the Buddha's exhortation and go on a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime to experience the benefits.

## The Four Great Pioneers of Buddhist Revival in India



1. Sayadaw. U Chandramani  
(1876-1972)



2. Anagarika Dhammapala  
(1864-1933)



3. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar  
(1891-1956)



4. Gen. Alexander Cunningham  
(1814-1893)

## **PART II**

### **The Four Places of Pilgrimage**

#### **Contents**

1. Lumbini, Birthplace of the Buddha
2. Bodhgaya, Place of Supreme Enlightenment
3. Sarnath, Place of the First Sermon
4. Kushinagar, Place of the Mahaparinibbana

# 1. Lumbini, Birthplace of the Buddha

Lumbini is located in Nepal, 20 km from the border town of Bhairawa, across the Indian border crossing at Sonauli.

## 1.1 Religious Significance

The Buddha was born on the full-moon day of Wesak, 623 BC (This dating is based on the Theravada tradition. Scholars' dating is 563 BC, 60 years later). His father was **Suddhodana**, chieftain of the Sakyas of Kapilavastu (Pali: Kapilavatthu). His mother was **Maya Devi**, daughter of Suppabuddha, a chieftain of the Koliyas of Devadaha

On that auspicious day, Maya Devi was traveling to her parents' home in Devadaha to deliver her first child following her Koliya family custom. Along the way, the entourage passed Lumbini Garden, a grove of Sala trees, where she decided to stop to bathe in the Sakyan pond and rest. Thereafter she began to experience the signs of labor. Summoning her maids to cordon off the area with curtains, she held on to the branch of a Sala tree with her right hand and gave birth to the Bodhisatta (Future Buddha) in a standing position.

According to Majjhima Nikaya Sutta No. 123, as soon as the Bodhisatta was born, he took seven steps to the North and declared his position in the world with these words:

<i>Aggo' ham asmi lokassa --</i>	I am the chief in the world.
<i>Jetto' ham asmi lokassa --</i>	I am the highest in the world.
<i>Setto' ham asmi lokassa --</i>	I am the noblest in the world.
<i>Ayam antima jati --</i>	This is my last birth.
<i>Natthi dani punabbhavo --</i>	There is no more becoming for me.

## 1.2 Historical Background

In 249 BC King Asoka visited Lumbini as part of his pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist places and worshipped at the sacred spot where the Buddha was born. To commemorate his visit, he built an Asokan Pillar with a horse capital and an edict written in Brahmi. Today only 6.7 meters of the pillar still stand but without the horse capital.

According to ancient tradition, when Asoka visited Lumbini, he constructed a brick shrine and placed a “Marker Stone” on top, to worship the exact site of the Buddha’s birthplace. In 1992, archaeologists started excavations at the old Maya Devi temple and discovered the said marker stone pinpointing the exact spot where the Buddha was born.

The Chinese pilgrim Faxian (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) visited Kapilavastu but found it impossible to go to Lumbini as it was engulfed by jungle and the road was dangerous. Another famous Chinese traveler Xuanzang (7<sup>th</sup> century AD) visited Kapilavastu and managed to travel to Lumbini, where he recorded the presence of the Sakyan pond, Sala tree, several stupas and a stone pillar with a horse capital built by King Asoka, which later broke off in the middle and fell to the ground.

After the Muslim conquest of Northern India in 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, Buddhist monks were persecuted and temples pillaged. Lumbini became deserted and fell into ruins. However, there were still isolated cases of pilgrims visiting the holy place. On the upper portion of the Asokan Pillar is an inscription from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. It records a local devotee who visited Lumbini before it was lost in the jungles for the next 500 years. Ripu Malla, a Prince of the Nagaraja dynasty of western Nepal, had his name and a verse inscribed on the Asoka pillar to record his visit to Lumbini.

In 1896 Gen. Khadga Shamsheer Rana, Governor of West Nepal, while clearing the jungle in Lumbini, discovered the broken Lumbini Pillar. Seeing an inscription near the base, he knew that it was important. To have it deciphered, he invited German archaeologist Dr Anton Führer, working nearby in India, to come and see it. Führer later claimed that he himself had discovered the pillar ignoring Khadga's role. Although some people have attributed the rediscovery of Lumbini to Führer, the site and the pillar were already known, as Khadga Shamsheer had sent rubbings of the inscription to Vincent Smith some years earlier but the latter failed to decipher the writing. (Ref: The Buddha and Dr Führer: An Archaeological Scandal by Charles Allen)

## 1.3 Objects of Interest

### (i) Asokan Pillar

Upon entering Lumbini Garden, the most visible landmark is a tall stone pillar surrounded by an iron fence. This is the famous Lumbini Pillar erected by King Asoka in 249 BC. Originally it had a horse capital on top but later it was struck by lightning and broken in the middle leaving 6.7 m standing without the capital. It is this pillar with its inscription that confirmed this site as the Buddha's birthplace. At the base is an inscription in ancient Magadhi Prakrit script translated as follows: *“King Piyadasi, Beloved of the Gods, in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of his reign visited this place and worshipped because here Buddha Sakyamuni, was born. He had both a **stone railing (silavigadabhica)** and a pillar set up. Because the Lord was born here, the village of Lumbini was exempted from tax and pay only one eighth share (of produce).”*

**Note:** Earlier '*silavigadabhica*' was translated as '**stone capital**', the horse capital of the Pillar. It was changed to '**stone railing**' after the Marker Stone was discovered because a railing was more appropriate to protect the shrine marking the Buddha's birthplace.



**Plate 1.** The Asokan Pillar at the back of the Maya Devi Temple.



**Plate 2:** Postcard photo of the old Maya Devi Temple built in 1939, which was demolished in 1991 for archaeological excavations to be carried out to locate the exact place where the Buddha was born.

## (ii) ‘Sanctum-Sanctorum’: Exact Spot of the Buddha’s Birthplace

The area just in front of the Asokan column was formerly the site of the old Maya Devi temple, a white box-shaped structure built in 1939 by the local administrator Keshar Shumser. It was dismantled in 1992 for archeological excavations to be carried out underneath the shrine room. On 4 February 1996, a team of UN-sponsored archeologists announced the discovery of the Buddha’s birthplace beneath the temple’s foundation. The archeologists excavated 15 chambers to a depth of about 5 m, and found a commemorative stone slab shaped like a womb atop a platform of seven layers of bricks dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, pinpointing the exact spot of the Buddha’s birthplace, the ‘Sanctum-Sanctorum’. According to ancient Buddhist literature, when King Asoka visited Lumbini in 249 BC, he placed a “**marker stone**” on top of a pile of bricks as a commemorative monument, for himself and posterity to worship.

Since the excavation was completed in 1996, the site has remained closed to the public, and the excavations covered by a corrugated iron roof and tarpaulin until 2001. Today a new temple has been built to house the ancient Nativity Sculpture, which was consecrated on Wesak Day in 26 May 2003. Inside pilgrims can circumambulate the excavated ruins of the temple complex and the Asokan shrine put up in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The historical “marker stone” said to pinpoint the spot where Mayadevi gave birth to Prince Siddhattha, is covered with bulletproof glass to make sure that it is well protected.

## (iii) Puskarni – the sacred pond

South of the Asokan pillar is the famous sacred pond **Puskarni**, believed to be the pond where Maya Devi washed herself before giving birth to the Bodhisatta. It has been enlarged several times.





**Plate 3:** Lumbini Garden in 2001 showing the famous Asokan Pillar. The area under the corrugated iron roof was the site where the old Maya Devi temple once stood before it was demolished for archaeological excavations in 1992. In the foreground is the Puskarni or sacred pond where Maya Devi had a bath before giving birth to Prince Siddhattha.



**Plate 4:** Photo of the new temple in Lumbini built over the remains of the old Maya Devi temple. In the foreground is the Puskarni or sacred pond, where Maya Devi washed herself before giving birth.



**Plate 5:** The new temple has a wooden platform for circumambulating the ancient Asokan shrine shown covered by a glass-topped box. This site is believed to be the exact spot in Lumbini where the Buddha was born.



**Plate 6:** The “Marker Stone” supposedly put by King Asoka to worship the exact spot where the Buddha was born.

#### (iv) Ancient Nativity Sculpture

In May 2003, the ancient stone sculpture depicting the **Nativity of the Buddha** was placed in the new temple complex built over the exact spot of the Buddha's birthplace. The sculpture dates back to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and contains a bas-relief image of Maya Devi, mother of the Lord, holding a branch of the Sala tree with her right hand, her left hand resting on her hips. On her right side supporting her is a woman, presumably her sister Maha Pajapati. Beyond the latter is the slightly bent figure of Sakka Devaraja, who is in the attitude of receiving the newborn child. Below is a small figure of Prince Siddhattha with a halo around his head, standing on a lotus pedestal. (see photo below)



## 2. Bodhgaya, Place of Supreme Enlightenment

Bodhgaya (Pali: Buddhagaya) is located in Bihar state, 105 km by road south of the state capital Patna.

### 2.1 Religious Significance

After the Great Renunciation, the Bodhisatta approached two ascetics named **Alara Kalama** and **Udakkā Ramaputta**, who taught him to attain the Formless Jhanas. Although they were the highest attainments at that time, still he was dissatisfied because they did not lead to Nibbana. Leaving them, he arrived at an isolated cave on a hill known as Dugeswari, where he underwent six years of painful and profitless practices until his body became skeleton-like and he nearly died. Realizing the futility of self-mortification, he adopted the Middle Path and started eating again to regain his strength. His five companions, thinking that he had given up the struggle and reverted to luxury, left him. The Bodhisatta was now alone in his struggle for Enlightenment.

One day on the eve of Wesak, while waiting to go on alms-round under a Banyan tree, the Bodhisatta was offered milk rice in a golden dish by the **Lady Sujata**, daughter of the chieftain of the nearby village of **Senanigama**. After the meal, the Bodhisatta took the dish and went to the **Neranjara** river and saying: “*If I am to succeed in becoming a Buddha to-day, let this dish go upstream; but if not, let it go downstream*”, he threw it into the water. There it floated to the middle of the river and raced upstream for eighty cubits (37 m) before it sank in a whirlpool.

In the evening, on the way to the Bodhi tree, the Bodhisatta was offered 8 handfuls of grass by the grass-cutter **Sotthiya**, which he placed on his seat under the Bodhi tree. Sitting cross-legged, facing the east, the Bodhisatta made a resolution, saying:

*“Let my skin, sinews and bones become dry. Let my flesh and blood dry up. Never from this seat will I stir until I have attained Buddhahood.”* (Ref: Buddhism in Translations by Henry Clarke Warren pp 71-83)

This was the culmination of his Perfections developed over countless eons that no being, not even Mara and his dreaded army, could unseat the Bodhisatta from the Aparajita or Unconquered throne. When challenged by Mara, the Bodhisatta called upon the earth to bear witness to his Thirty Perfections, by touching the ground with his right hand. Instantly, the earth responded with a great quake that shook and scattered Mara and his forces until they fled in defeat. Before the sun had set, the Bodhisatta had vanquished Mara and his forces. Then with mind tranquilized and purified, in the first watch of night, he developed the Knowledge of Past Lives; in the middle watch, the Divine Eye; and in the last watch, he developed the Knowledge of Destruction of Taints and attained Supreme Enlightenment. A **Supreme Buddha** (Samma-sambuddho) had arisen in the world on the full moon day of **Wesak** in 588 BC.

## 2.2 Historical Background

Bodhgaya (Pali name: Buddhagaya), scene of the Buddha’s Supreme Enlightenment, is the most hallowed place on earth to Buddhists. During the Buddha’s time, this place by the banks of the River Neranjara was known as Uruvela. King Asoka was the first to build a temple at this sacred spot. Beginning with Asoka’s first visit in 259 BC, countless pilgrims have gravitated to this cradle of Buddhism without intermission for more than 1500 years. The devastation of Buddhist viharas and shrines by Muslim hordes in the 13<sup>th</sup> century abruptly halted the flow of pilgrims to Bodhgaya. **Dharmasvamin**, a Tibetan pilgrim, visited Bodhgaya in 1234 AD. He found the place deserted and wrote:

*“Only four monks were found staying (in the vihara). One said, ‘It is not good. All have fled in fear of the Turushka soldiery.’ They blocked up the door in front of the Mahabodhi image with bricks and plastered it. Near it they placed another image as a substitute.”*

When Buddhism declined in India, the Burmese came to the rescue of the decaying Mahabodhi Temple by undertaking repairs during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. Thereafter, Bodhgaya was forgotten by the Buddhists and the Great Temple fell into ruins. A wandering Hindu ascetic, Mahant Gosain Giri, taking advantage of the situation, established his Math (temple) at Bodhgaya and took control of the Mahabodhi and its environment in 1590 AD. Thereafter, the holy Buddhist shrine passed into the hands of successive Mahants (abbot) who used the place for sacrilegious practices. In 1861, **Cunningham** found the Mahant and his followers indulging in all sorts of non-Buddhist ceremonies at the main shrine.

**Sir Edwin Arnold**, author of the “Light of Asia” visited the Mahabodhi Temple in 1885 and reported this observation in the Daily Telegraph in London: *“The Buddhist world had, indeed, well-nigh forgotten this hallowed and most interesting centre of their faith – the Mecca, the Jerusalem, of million Oriental congregations when I sojourned in Buddhagaya a few years ago. I was so grieved to see Maharatta peasants performing ‘Shraddh’ (Hindu funereal offering ceremony) in such a place, and thousands of precious ancient relics of carved stone inscribed with Sanskrit lying in piles around.”*

The battle to regain control of Mahabodhi Temple by Buddhists began in January 22, 1891 when **Anagarika Dharmapala** visited Bodhgaya. Visibly moved by the neglect and sacrilege of this most sacred shrine, he took the vow, *“I will work on to make this sacred spot to be cared for by our own Bhikkhus.”*

As a first step, he founded the **Maha Bodhi Society** of Buddhagaya in May 31, 1891 to garner support for this noble objective. Next, he invited four Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka to come and stay at Bodhgaya, namely: Ven. **Chandajoti**, Ven. **Sumangala**, Ven. **Pemmananda** and Ven. **Sudassana**. They arrived at Bodhgaya in July 1891 and took up residence in the Burmese Rest House. As the Mahant had property rights to the land in Bodhgaya, he objected to their presence and in February 1893, two of the monks were severely beaten up by his men.

Two years later in 1895, when Anagarika Dharmapala attempted to install a Buddha image presented to him by the people of Japan on the upper floor of the Temple, he was assaulted and prevented to do so by the Mahant's men. So the image was kept in the Burmese Rest House. Still the Mahant and some Hindu organizations were not satisfied and tried to get the image removed from the Rest House but the Government did not yield.

In 1906, the Mahant filed a suit seeking to eject the Buddhist monks from the Rest House. Thereafter a long legal battle ensued between the Mahant and the Buddhists, which continued till 1949, when the State of Bihar enacted the Buddha Gaya Temple Management Act, which effectively transferred control of the Temple land and other property to a Management Committee.

Two things of the Bill were objectionable; one that the nine-man Management Committee of the Temple would have a Hindu majority, and the other that Buddhist members should be of Indian nationality. In spite of protests by the Maha Bodhi Society, the Bill was passed with an amendment for provision of an Advisory Board in which the majority should be Buddhists and not necessarily all of Indian nationality. This means that Buddhists can only advise on the management of the Mahabodhi Temple but the control and final say belongs to the Hindus!

### 3. Objects of Interest

#### (i) Mahabodhi Temple

The Mahabodhi Temple has a long history. Excavations by Cunningham in 1872 suggested three periods in its construction. The first phase of construction by **King Asoka** during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC was the Bodhi Shrine under the Bodhi Tree. The second phase of construction during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, involved renovation of the original Bodhi Shrine by two pious ladies, **Surangi** and **Nagadevi**, wives of **Sunga** kings. **Huviska**, the Kushan king of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD undertook the third phase of construction. The images of the Buddha originated during this period. Therefore shrines were erected for their installation.

Cunningham suggested that the entire Mahabodhi Temple, as seen today, was mainly the structure of the Huviska period (111-138 AD). As it was built over the remains of Asoka's shrine, the **Vajrasana** (Diamond) Throne retains its original position of the Seat of Enlightenment (**Bodhimana**). In the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, renovations were carried out which included placing a new basalt slab over the older plaster throne at the Vajrasana. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, massive renovations were carried out under the able supervision of Cunningham, Beglar and R. L. Mitra to restore the Maha Bodhi Temple, which had fallen into ruins after centuries of vandalism and neglect by its squatter-occupants, the successor Mahants of Gosain Giri. The magnificent building we see today is the result of the rare devotion and dedication of **Cunningham**, **Beglar** and **Mitra**.

The Mahabodhi Temple is undoubtedly the most exquisite-looking building in Buddhagaya. Standing 52 meters high with a base of 15.2 meter square, it consists of a straight pyramidal tower surmounted by a stupa. At the corners of the base, there arise four smaller towers – miniature replicas of the main spire. The main



door faces east. In front of it is an imposing ancient gateway decorated with carvings. The niches on the walls of both sides of the Temple contain images of the Buddha. The main shrine hall or Sanctum on the ground floor is reached after passing through a vaulted passage, on both sides of which are stone staircases leading up to a smaller shrine hall on the first floor.

On entering the Sanctum, one comes face-to-face with the great gilded image of the Buddha seated in the earth-touching posture (*bhumi-phassa-mudra*). Just gazing at this magnificent image of our Lord will certainly evoke feelings of joy and reverence in the heart of the pilgrim! This is the result of the faith and devotion in heeding the Buddha's exhortation to "*visit the holy places and look upon them with feelings of reverence*".

The colossal gilded image is from the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Here the Buddha is depicted as sitting on a patterned cushion instead of a lotus. It is supported by a pedestal, decorated with figures of lions alternating with elephants. The patterned cushion is a common feature found in other Buddha images from Eastern India, which was probably copied from this image. Most people are not aware of the fact that this image was not in the temple when archeological explorations were going on in and around Buddhagaya by the then British government. According to an article on "Buddhagaya Sculptures" in the Sambodhi 1993, R. L. Mitra noted that it was in the Mahant's compound. Later on, at the request of **Cunningham** and **Beglar**, it was moved to its present location at the main shrine. If not for the timely intervention of these two gentlemen, this inspiring image would still be wasting in the Mahant's compound instead of its present rightful place for pilgrims to worship!



**Plate 7:** Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya is the most hallowed place on earth to Buddhists, who come from all over the world to pay homage to the Buddha.



**Plate 8:** The 10th century colossal Buddha image inside Mahabodhi Temple.

## (ii) The Bodhi Tree (**Bodhidruma**)

The Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment is situated behind the Temple. It is a Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), also known in Pali as ‘*assattha*’. It is said to have sprung up at the same time when the Buddha was born, i.e., his co-natal (*sahajata*). According to the Commentaries, different Buddhas attained Enlightenment seated under different trees and each of them became the ‘**Bodhi tree**’ of that particular Buddha during his time. In the present dispensation, only the Bodhi tree of Gotama Buddha is revered. The site of the Bodhi tree is the same for all Buddhas. It is believed that no place on earth can support the weight of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. The ground is so firm that it remained unmoved, even as a violent earthquake shook the world and scattered Mara and his army who had come to challenge the Bodhisatta for the Seat of Enlightenment.

From earliest times, kings and commoners have come here to honor it. Being the object of veneration of Buddhists, it became the target of destruction by the enemies of Buddhism. According to Xuanzang, the Bodhi tree was first cut down by **Asoka** before his conversion but later out of remorse, he revived the tree by bathing the roots with scented water and milk. He paid homage to the tree so earnestly that his queen, Tissarakkha, filled with jealousy had it destroyed secretly. Again Asoka had it revived. Thereafter, he built a wall 3 m high to surround it for protection. After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, Sunga king **Pusyamitra**, a persecutor of Buddhism, also destroyed the Bodhi tree but a sapling of the tree from Sri Lanka was brought back and replanted in the same spot. During 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, **Sasanka**, a Hindu king cut down the Bodhi tree but sometime later it was replanted with a sapling of the Bodhi tree of Sri Lanka by King **Purvavarma** of Magadha, who then built a wall 7.3 m high to surround it. Its remains were 6.1 m high when Xuanzang visited it in 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. In 1876, the old decaying Bodhi tree fell down during a storm. **Cunningham** replanted a sapling from it on the same spot.

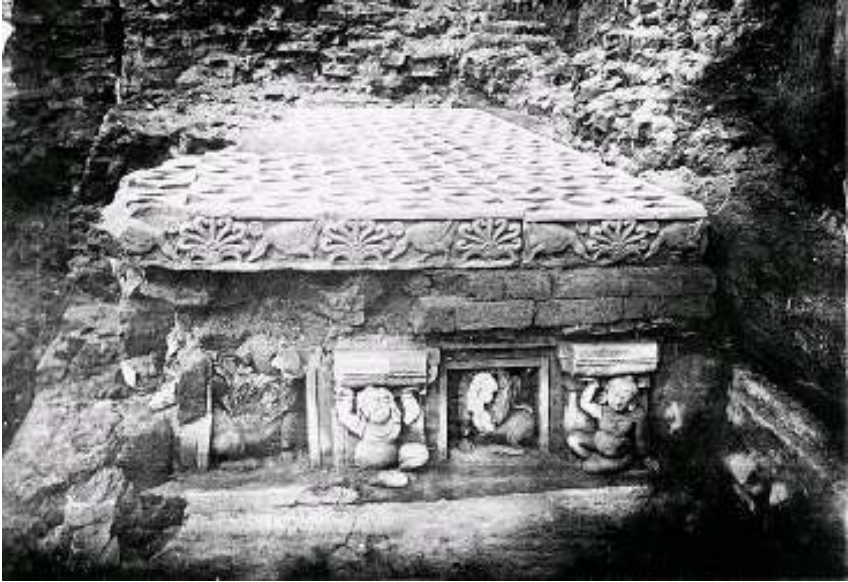


**Plate 9:** The present Bodhi Tree behind the temple was replanted in 1876. It is surrounded by a 6-metre high sandstone balustrade to protect it from vandals.



**Plate 10:** The Seat of Enlightenment is under the canopy on the left. The Buddha sat under facing the east with his back towards the Bodhi Tree.





**Plate 11:** The Diamond Throne when it was discovered and the photo taken in 1892 by Cunningham during excavations at the Mahabodhi Temple.



**Plate12:** The Diamond Throne as seen today after repairs.

### (iii) The Vajrasana or Diamond Throne

The Vajrasana is located between the Bodhi tree and the back of the Temple. It marks the actual spot where the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment. It is said that the Buddha sat facing east with his back to the trunk of the Bodhi tree. According to legend, when the Bodhisatta tried sitting on the other three sides of the tree, the ground on which he sat sank down. Only the eastern side held firm, capable of supporting his enlightenment. A more practical reason why the Buddha chose the eastern side was to avoid the afternoon sun from the west, which is quite strong during the month of May. A red sandstone slab measuring 2.3 meters long by 1.3m wide by 0.9m high now marks the site Enlightenment or **Bodhimana**. Pilgrims who visit this spot should spend some time in this conducive place to reflect on the virtues of the Buddha, to attain fullness of faith and calm, followed by mindfulness meditation to develop spiritual insight.

### (iv) The Buddha's Stay at 7 Places after Enlightenment

After attaining Buddhahood on the full-moon night of *Wesak*, as dawn broke, the Buddha uttered a paean of joy (*udana*). While sitting on the *Vajrasana*, he decided to continue sitting on the undefeated throne on which he overcame Mara and fulfilled all his wishes, including the one to become a Buddha.

- **First Week on the Throne (*Pallanka Sattaha*)**

The Buddha sat on the Diamond Throne for seven days in meditation absorbed in the bliss of emancipation (*Arahantship* Fruition). At the end of seven days, he emerged from the absorption and contemplated on the Doctrine of Dependent Origination (*Paticca Samuppada*) the whole night.

- **Second Week of the Unblinking Gaze (*Animisa Sattaha*)**

Throughout the second week, as a mark of gratitude to the Bodhi Tree for providing him shelter, the Buddha stood gazing at it without closing his eyes. On the spot where the Buddha stood a shrine was erected by King Asoka. Called the **Animisilocana Cetiya** or ‘Unblenching Gaze’ shrine, it is located on elevated ground within the courtyard in front of the Temple.

- **Third Week on the Walk (*Cankama Sattaha*)**

The third week was spent on walking meditation along a ‘jewelled promenade or **Cankama**’ running from east to west between the Diamond throne and the Animisilocana Cetiya.

- **Fourth Week in the Jewelled House (*Ratanaghara Sattaha*)**

The Buddha spent the fourth week in the ‘Jewelled House’, reflecting on the **Abhidhamma**, which deals with absolute truths concerning mental and material processes. As he contemplated on the deep and profound doctrine of the **Patthana** or **Conditional Relations**, there arose great rapture in the Omniscient mind, which activated material processes in the body to emit rays of six colours – blue, gold, white, red, pink and a massive brightness of all these assorted colours. This spot is now marked by a small shrine within the compound to the north of the Cankama.

- **Fifth Week at Ajapala Nigrodha Tree (*Ajapala Sattaha*)**

During the fifth week, the Buddha sat at the root of the Ajapala Banyan tree reflecting on the Dhamma and absorbed in the bliss Fruition of Arahantship. This Banyan tree was called Ajapala because goatherds came for shelter under its shade. Here the Buddha declared the qualities of a true Brahman in reply to a question by a conceited brahmin. This site is indicated by a signboard within the courtyard, directly in front of the Temple.

- **Sixth Week at Mucalinda (*Mucalinda Sattaha*)**

After seven days at the Ajapala Banyan tree, the Buddha moved to the Mucalinda (*Barringtonia acutangula*) tree, a short distance south of the Temple. There he sat for seven days at the root of the Mucalinda tree, absorbed in the bliss of Arahantship. At that time, there arose an untimely rainstorm and gloom for seven days. Mucalinda, serpent king of the lake, came out and used its coils to encircle the Buddha's body and its hood to cover the Buddha's head thereby protecting the Lord. The site of this episode is at the Mucalinda pond, a short distance south of the Temple.

- **Seventh Week at Rajayatana Tree (*Rajayatana Sattaha*)**

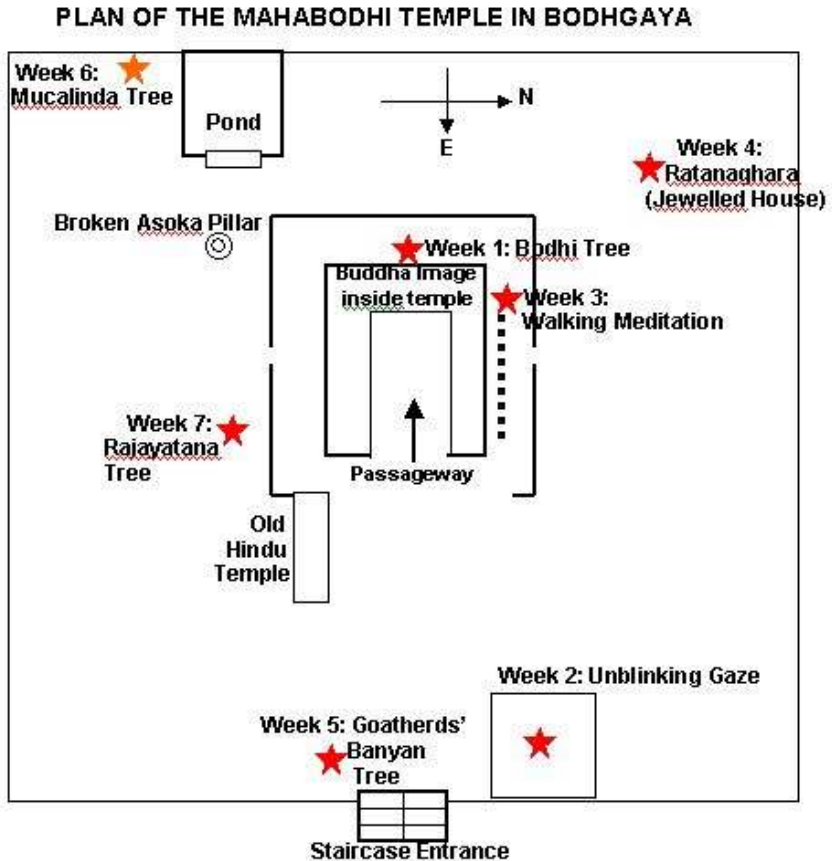
After seven days at the Mucalinda tree, the Buddha moved to the Rajayatana tree (*Buchanania latifolia*) near the Temple. Here he sat at the foot of the tree absorbed in the bliss of *Arahantship* for seven days. At that time, two merchant brothers, **Tapussa** and **Bhallika**, from **Ukkala** met the Buddha and offered him rice cakes and honey. They became the first lay disciples and took the Twofold Refuge, reciting: "*Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami.*" Before taking leave, they asked the Buddha for an object of worship. Thereupon the Buddha rubbed his head and presented them with eight hairs.

The site of this episode is marked by a signboard just south of the Temple.

**Note:** Myanmar claims that Ukkala was located in Myanmar and when the two brothers returned to their native village, the precious hair relics were eventually enshrined at the **Shwedagon Pagoda** in Yangon.



Below is the plan of the Mahabodhi Temple complex showing the location of the seven places where the Buddha spent seven days at each place.





**Plate 13:** First Week on the Throne (Pallanka Sattaha)



**Plate 14:** Second Week of Unblinking Gaze (Animisalocana Sattaha)



**Plate 15:** The Buddha spent the third week in walking meditation on the Cankama or cloister running east to west near the Bodhi Tree as shown.



**Plate 16:** The Buddha spent the fourth week in the “Jewelled House” reflecting on the Abhidhamma. As he contemplated on the deep and profound doctrines, there arose great rapture in his mind, causing light of various colors to emit from his body. These colors are represented in the Buddhist flag.



**Plate 17:** The Buddha spent the fifth week at the Aja Pala Nigrodha tree for 7 days in meditation. Here he declared the qualities of a true Brahman in reply to a haughty brahmin who asked what are the things that make a Brahman.



**Plate 18:** The Buddha spent the sixth week at the root of the Mucalinda tree when there arose an untimely rainstorm for 7 days. Mucalinda, serpent king of the lake came out to protect the Lord from the rain and cold.





**Plate 19:** Seventh week at the Rajayatana Tree shown on the right surrounded by a sandstone balustrade.

### **(v) Sujata Kuti, Site of Lady Sujata's Milk Rice Offering**

Just across the bridge over the river Neranjara is the village of **Bakraur**. Formerly the object of interest at this place was a grassy mound that was fenced up. The site was popularly known as **Sujata Kuti or Sujatagarh** while the village was known as **Senanigama** during the Buddha's time.

In 1973-74, the Archeological Society of India (ASI) undertook excavations of the mound to reveal the remains of an extensive brick stupa 65.5m in diameter and 11m high, indicating the religious importance of the place. The ASI has put a signboard to indicate that the stupa marks the site of Lady Sujata's house (Sujatagarh).

However it is more likely that this large stupa was erected by King Asoka to mark the place where the **Lady Sujata offered milk rice** to the Bodhisatta prior to his Enlightenment since the selection of sites for stupas were not arbitrary. King Asoka erected such memorials only at places that were traditionally connected with important events in the Buddha's life.



**Plate 20:** Based on the name “Sujatagarh”, which means Sujata's Place, this stupa probably marks the site where the Lady Sujata offered milk rice to the Bodhisatta on the eve of his Enlightenment. This is because such memorial stupas were usually erected to commemorate important events in the Buddha's life.

### 3. Sarnath, Place of the First Sermon

Sarnath is located in the state of Uttar Pradesh, 30 km from the city of Varanasi (Benares) and 250 km east of Bodhgaya

#### 3.1 Religious Significance

After spending seven weeks in Bodhgaya following his Enlightenment, the Buddha was undecided about teaching the Dhamma to others as he realized that it was profound and hard to discover, and others would not understand him. The deity Brahma Sahampati who became aware of the Buddha's thoughts, pleaded with him to teach the Dhamma otherwise the world would be lost. The Buddha considered the plea and out of compassion decided to go to Benares to preach to the Five Ascetics, namely: **Kondanna, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahanama** and **Assaji**, who had served him for six long years, but left after he abandoned the path of self-mortification.

Traveling on foot, he arrived at **Deer Park** or **Isipatana** in modern day Sarnath on the full-moon day of *Asalha*, exactly two months after Wesak. When they saw the Buddha coming in the distance, they decided not to welcome him, but as soon as the Buddha approached, they found themselves unable to keep their pact and began to serve him. Eventually the Buddha was able to convince them of his attainment. That very night, he delivered the historic First Sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* or the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of *Dhamma*, which led to **Kondanna** attaining the first stage of sainthood called *sotapanna* (stream-winner) at the end of the discourse. The remaining four ascetics attained *sotapanna* status, successively over the next four days. On the fifth day, the Buddha preached to them the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* or Discourse on the Characteristics of Non-Self, hearing which they attained arahantship or final sainthood.

In Sarnath too, the Buddha converted the rich man **Yasa** and his fifty-four friends, who also became arahants. After the rainy season, the Buddha dispatched them in various directions to propagate the Dhamma, with each to go a separate way. Thus Sarnath became famous as the place of the First Sermon, as well as the founding of the Community of Monks (Bhikkhu Sangha).

### 3.2 Historical Background

**King Asoka** visited Sarnath in 249 BC and erected several monuments to mark his pilgrimage, notably; the Dhammarajika stupa, Dhamekh stupa and the Asokan pillar surmounted by the famous Lion Capital, which is now the crest of India. During the reign of Kushan king **Kaniska** (78 AD), Sarnath was a centre of religious activity and the famous colossal Bodhisatta image with a large parasol was installed by the bhikkhu **Bala** of Mathura. During the Gupta period (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century AD), the Dhamekh Stupa was encased with carved stones, the Mulagandhakuti main shrine was enlarged and the famous Preaching Buddha image, a gift of **King Kumaragupta**, was added.

In 520 AD, Sarnath had its share of destruction during the invasion of the Huns under the barbarian **Mihirakula**. But after the Huns were defeated, Sarnath again flourished under the Buddhist king, **Harsa Vardharna** (606-647 AD) and continued to be a living shrine under the Pala kings (8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century AD). The last known patron of Sarnath was **Queen Kumaradevi**, the pious Buddhist wife of **King Govindachandra** of Benares (1114-1154 AD). She built a large monastery at Sarnath named Dhammacakka Jina Vihara, the ruins of which were exposed during excavations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Things took a turn for the worst when Muslim hordes overran India at the close of the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD and started their trail of destruction and massacre of the Buddhist monks.



After the Diaspora of the Sangha in India, Sarnath became deserted and was forgotten for about 600 years. Archeological excavations at the site in the 1800's by **Major Kittoe** revealed evidence of a tragic period of massive and sudden destruction by fire. The discoveries of remains of ready-made wheaten cakes and wheat and other grain in some of the cells suggest that the conflagration had been so sudden and rapid, as to force the monks to abandon their very food. In short, the evidence would indicate that the destruction was caused by fire applied by the hands of an adversary bent on extermination rather than by any ordinary fire! According to **Cunningham**, so vividly was the impression of a great final catastrophe by fire fixed in Major Kittoe's mind that he summed his conclusion as follows: "*All have been sacked and burnt, priests, temples, idols, all together. In some places, bones, iron, timber, idols, etc., are all fused into huge heaps; and this has happened more than once.*"

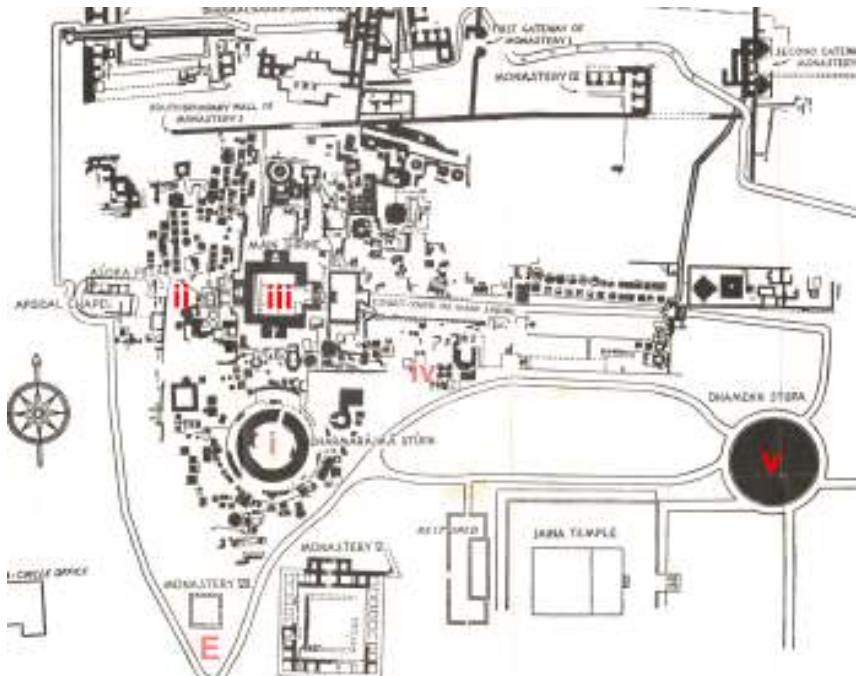
In 1794, Sarnath came to the notice of the world under tragic circumstances. **Jagat Singh**, a minister in Benares, dismantled the famous Dhammarajika *stupa* as a convenient way of collecting bricks and stones for building a housing colony, which he named Jagatjanj, after himself. When the stupa was pulled down, workmen found at a depth of 8.3 m from the top, a stone box containing a green marble casket. Inside it were human relics, presumably those of the Buddha enshrined there by King Asoka. Following Hindu rites, Jagat Singh consigned them into the Ganges River, where they were lost forever.

This act of vandalism would have gone unnoticed but for a report about the said discovery by **Jonathan Duncan**, Commissioner of Benares, which appeared in the 'Asiatic Researches'. Soon public attention was attracted to the ruins of Sarnath and in 1815 **Col. C. Mackenzie** began explorations and discovered some sculptures, which are now kept at the Calcutta Museum. In 1835-36, Cunningham carried out excavations and recovered over forty

sculptures and carved stones. Another tragedy struck when they were carted away in his absence together with sixty cartloads of stones from the shrines as construction material for two bridges and some buildings in Benares.

Further excavations were undertaken on and off from 1851 to 1922, and exposed the Dhamekh stupa, the Dhammarajika stupa, Mulagandhakuti shrine, Asokan pillar and the ruins of several monasteries. The first four monuments are considered sacred because of their association with the Buddha. The fifth sacred spot is probably the sunken shrine of Pancayatana, which is believed by some monk teachers to be the site where the Buddha preached to the rich man Yasa.

Below is the ground plan of Deer Park, Sarnath extracted from the publication “Sarnath” by the Archaeological Survey of India.



### 3.3 Objects of Interest

#### Important Monuments in Deer Park

While in Sarnath, pilgrims should visit 5 important monuments related to the Buddha's ministry in Deer Park, Sarnath. Their locations are shown in the ground plan of Deer Park identified by the numbers below.

- (i) Dhammarajika Stupa
- (ii) Asokan Pillar
- (iii) Ruins of Main Shrine
- (iv) Sunken Shrine of Pancayatana
- (v) Dhamekh Stupa
- (E) Entrance

#### (i) The Dhammarajika Stupa

The ruins of the Dhammarajika stupa is a short distance north of the main entrance. It consists of a circular base of what remained after the wanton act of destruction by Jagat Singh. The original stupa built by King Asoka was 13.5 meters in diameter but it had been enlarged many times so that the base we see today is much larger. The Dhammarajika Stupa is believed to be built by King Asoka at the time of his re-distributing the relics from the original stupas and enshrining them in other stupas at different places throughout his empire. The sanctity of this stupa is amply borne out by six enlargements, which it successively underwent, the last being in 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. It is the only relic stupa in Deer Park, the Dhamekh Stupa being only a memorial stupa. These facts support the view that the site must have been the venue of a very important event, such as the preaching of the First Sermon. In fact, the large number of votive stupas surrounding the Dhammarajika Stupa lends further support to this view.

## (ii) The Asokan Pillar

Just a short distance north of the Dhammarajika Stupa is a concrete path that leads to a small pavilion with an iron railing. Inside one can see several pieces of the broken Asokan Pillar of Sarnath. The original pillar was 15 meters high and surmounted by the famous Lion Capital, which consists of four lions standing back to back and can be seen in Sarnath Museum today. This unique sculpture is made of polished sandstone and stands at 2.15 metres. It is more elaborate than all the other capitals of the Asokan pillars bearing the Edicts of Asoka. A graphic representation of it was adopted as the National Emblem of India in 1950 and appears in Indian currency notes.

This Asokan pillar is believed to mark the site where the Buddha assembled the first sixty arahants and exhorted them to go in different directions to spread the Teaching. On the pillar is an inscription, which says: “*Let no one cause a division in the Sangha.*” During Asoka’s time, bhikkhus from many sects lived in Sarnath and it is believed that he issued this **Sanghabhedaka** (Causing a Schism in the Order) in order to promote harmony among the various Buddhist sects living in Sarnath at that time.

## (iii) The Ruins of Main Shrine (Mulagandhakuti)

From the pavilion of the Asokan Pillar, one can see the rear section of the ruins of a large ancient building. This used to be the Main Shrine of Sarnath. It is believed to be built on the site of the Mulagandhakuti or First Perfumed Chamber, where the Buddha spent the first rainy season in Sarnath. According to the Dhammapada Commentary, the rich man **Nandiya** was the donor and as soon as the Buddha accepted the gift, a celestial mansion arose in Tavatimsa Heaven awaiting its owner, Nandiya.

The main shrine was a square building, 18.3 m on each side, with the entrance facing east. The area between the ruins of the Main Shrine and the Dharmarajika Stupa is believed to be the site of the **Cankama**, the promenade where the Buddha did his walking meditation. This belief is supported by the discovery of the famous colossal Bodhisatta image installed at this site by **Bhikkhu Bala** of Mathura in AD 81 during the reign of the Kushan king Kanishka.

#### (iv) The Sunken Shrine of Pancayatana

Just a short distance east of the Main Shrine, is a sunken shrine under a concrete platform. It is made of terra cotta bricks and modeled to resemble one of the four-squares temples of the Gupta period, called ‘pancayatana’ or ‘five bases’. The site of the sunken shrine of Pancayatana is believed by Burmese Sayadaws to be the place where the Buddha converted Yasa, the son of a millionaire of Benares

Yasa was raised in a life of luxury and lived surrounded by female musicians who used to entertain him with song and dance. One night he fell asleep during the show and they too went to sleep in the hall. When Yasa awoke in the middle of the night, he felt so disgusted at seeing his female dancers and musicians asleep in such repulsive postures that he ran away from his house towards Deer Park. The Buddha had risen before dawn and was doing walking meditation in the Cankama beside his residence. When the Buddha saw Yasa coming, he left the walk and went to meet Yasa to teach him the Dhamma. Yasa became a sotapanna after listening to the Buddha’s preaching at the Deer Park. As the Pancayatana Shrine is a short distance in front of the Cankama, it is very likely to be the place where the Buddha converted Yasa.

### (v) The Dhamekh Stupa

Dhamekh Stupa, the most imposing structure in Sarnath, is cylindrical in shape, 28.3 m in basal diameter and 43.6 m tall. It is a solid structure with a drum of stonework and the upper part of brickwork. The drum has eight arched projections, each with a niche for an image. Below them are beautifully carved geometric and floral patterns with human figures and birds, of the Gupta period. It is situated 150 meters east of the Dhammarajika Stupa. Cunningham who explored Sarnath in 1835-36 also carried out excavations in the Dhamekh Stupa. While boring a shaft in the centre of the stupa in search of relics, Cunningham found remains of the original stupa in mud and bricks. It was probably the stupa raised by Asoka when he visited Sarnath. No bodily relics were found inside this stupa, but a slab with Buddha's creed '*ye dhamma hetuppabhava, etc.*' in the characters of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century was discovered. This appears to suggest that it is a memorial stupa.

An inscription of the Pala king Mahipala I (1026 AD), states that two brothers Sthirapala and Vasantapala constructed a new stone shrine Gandhakuti and restored the **Dhammarajika Stupa** and the **Dharmacakra**. Based on this inscription, the Archeological Survey of India had suggested that the **Dharmacakra** refers to the Dhamekh Stupa and it marks the site of the First Sermon.

However, the name mentioned in the inscription is 'Dharmacakra' **not** 'Dharmacakra Stupa'. It could be the name of a monastery (Dharmacakra Jina Vihara) or some other structure (such as the Dharmacakra wheel on the Sarnath Lion Capital).

It is unlikely to be a stupa as there has been no record of a stupa of that name in Sarnath before.



**Plate 21:** Circular base of the Dhammarajika Stupa after it was pulled down by Jagat Singh in 1794. Note the numerous votive stupas surrounding it.



**Plate 22:** Photo shows the pavilion at the back of the Main Shrine in Deer Park. Inside one can see several pieces of the broken Asokan Pillar of Sarnath.



**Plate 23:** Photo showing the broken pieces of the Asokan Pillar of Sarnath.

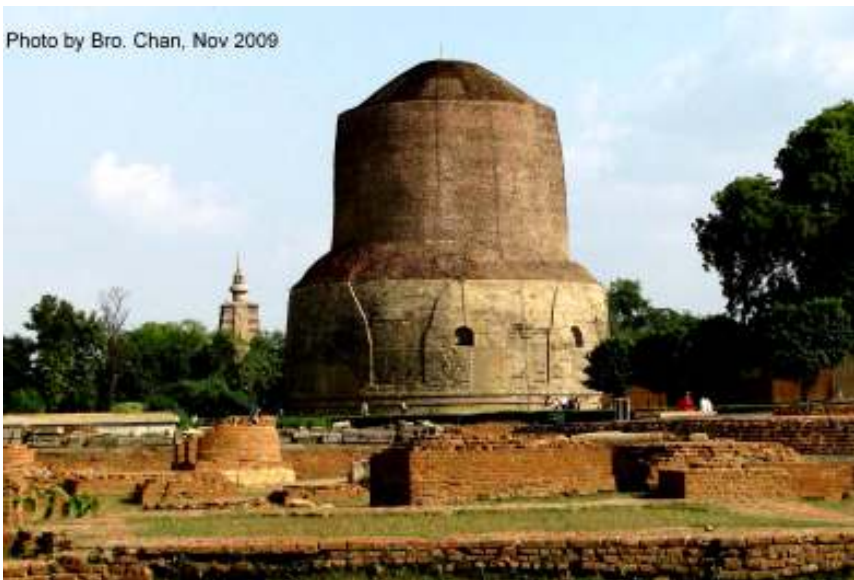


**Plate 24:** Photo showing the ruins of the Main Shrine in Deer Park





**Plate 25:** The sunken shrine of Pancayatana is believed to be the place where the Buddha converted Yasa, son of the rich man of Sarnath.



**Plate 26:** Although Dhamekh Stupa is the most imposing structure in Sarnath, it is a memorial stupa of lesser significance compared with the other shrines.

## (vi) Sarnath Archeological Museum

The museum houses antiquities recovered from the ruins at Deer Park during excavations from 1905 onwards. Inside the museum, numerous sculptures of the Buddha and Bodhisatta are displayed. The four most important sculptures are described below.

### • **Lion Capital of Sarnath**

On entering the exhibition hall, one sees the most magnificent sculpture of **Mauryan art** – the Lion Capital, which once crowned the Asokan Pillar at Deer Park. This polished sandstone sculpture is 2.3 m tall and consists of four lions sitting back to back on a circular abacus about 0.3 m high supported by a Persepolitan Bell. The abacus has four running animals, each separated by a Dhammacakka wheel on its side. **Alfred Foucher** (1865-1952), a French Indologist and specialist in Buddhist archaeology, has suggested this symbolism: **Elephant** represents Buddha's conception as Mayadevi dreamt that an elephant entered



her womb; **Horse** represents the Bodhisatta's Great Renunciation as he left home on his horse Kanthaka; **Lion** represents the Buddha as lion of the Sakyas; **Bull** represents the endurance of the Dhamma (Teaching). The four lions that surmount the **Sarnath Capital** symbolize the Lion's roar of the Buddha in the four directions. This Lion Capital is the **crest of India** and the Dhammacakka Wheel is the emblem of its **national flag**. It has 24 spokes to represent the 12 links of the Law of Dependent Origination in forward order and the 12 links in reverse order.

- **Colossal Bodhisatta Image**

This colossal standing image is of red sandstone donated by the bhikkhu Bala in AD 81 during the reign of King Kaniska and represents the best tradition of Mathuran art. Behind the statue is a stone shaft, which once supported a beautifully carved umbrella. The stone umbrella can also be seen in the main hall.

- **Buddha's Life Panels**

There is a sculptured panel showing the four principal events, namely: Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon and Mahaparinibbana of the Lord Buddha (Left panel). Another panel illustrates the eight events in the life of the Buddha, namely, the four principal events and the four miracles - the great miracle at Sravasti, the descent from Heaven at Sankasia, the taming of the drunken elephant Nalagiri at Rajgir and the offering of honey to the Buddha by a monkey at Vaishali. (Right panel)



- **Preaching Buddha Image**



The seated Buddha image in Dhammacakka mudra or Preaching posture is one of the most beautiful creations of Gupta art. This famous sculpture was a gift of **King Kumaragupta** who ruled from AD 414-455. The halo around the head is carved with floral designs and has two celestial figures on both upper corners. Inset at the bottom are seven figures, representing the Five Ascetics plus the Queen and her son in kneeling position, paying homage to the Dhammacakka wheel.

### (vii) The Mahabodhi Society of India, Sarnath

The credit for restoring Sarnath into a living shrine goes to **Anagarika Dharmapala**, founder of the Maha Bodhi Society of India. He established the Mahabodhi Society in Sarnath located on the left of the **Mulagandhakuti Vihara**, which it oversees, in addition to the Mahabodhi schools, college, library and training school for monks and nuns. Inside the Society building is a museum displaying photos and various paraphernalia belonging to the late Anagarika Dharmapala. Lately the Society has constructed a hospital to cater for the poor patients in Sarnath.

### **(viii) Mulagandhakuti Vihara**

The Mulagandhakuti Vihara was built by Maha Bodhi Society of India in 1931 under the efforts of **Anagarika Dharmapala** with the financial assistance of **Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Foster** of Hawaii. On the day of opening, the sacred relics of the Buddha unearthed in Taxila in 1913-14, were presented by the Director General of Archeology representing the Government to the Maha Bodhi Society. In 1913, British archaeologist **Sir John Marshall** (1876-1958) made a significant discovery in the ancient city of **Taxila**. While excavating the ruins near the **Dhammarajika Stupa** in **Chir Tope** mound at Taxila, 40km from Islamabad in Pakistan, he found the bone relics of the Buddha that had been enshrined during the Kushan period in 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Sixteen years later, **A. H. Longhurst** discovered another set of bone relics in **Nagarjunakonda**, South India.

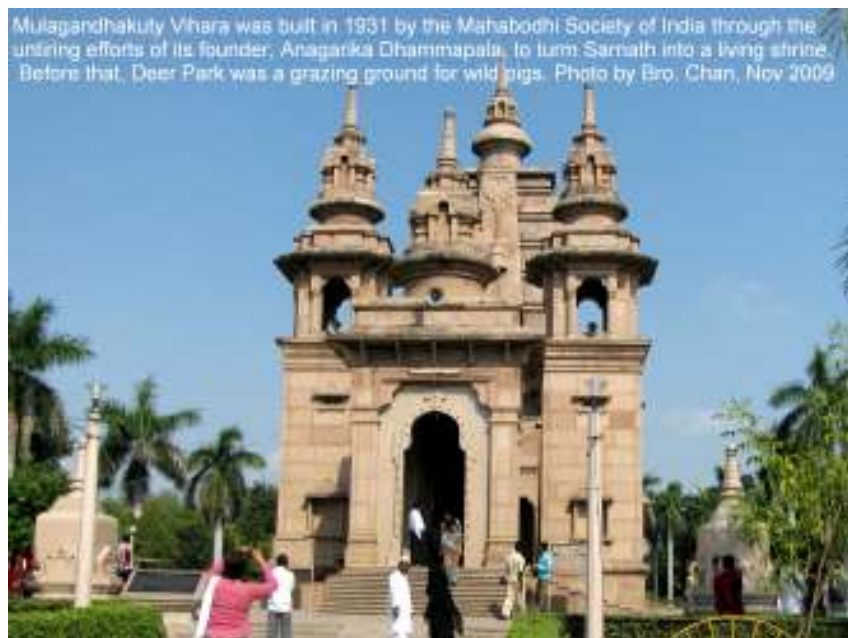
These two sets of relics are presently enshrined in an underground chamber under the Preaching Buddha image and are taken out every year during Kathina for worship. Japanese artist, **Kosetsu Nosu** spent 3 years from 1932-35 painting the beautiful Ajanta style frescoes on both walls of the vihara. A British Buddhist, **B L Broughton** donated for this splendid work.

### **(ix) Chaukhandi Stupa**

This is the first monument to be seen as one enters Sarnath. This mass of brickwork with an octagonal tower on top is what remains of an ancient stupa. The tower was constructed to commemorate the visit of Hamuyan, father of Akbar Khan to Sarnath in 1588 AD.

This site is believed to be the place where the Buddha stopped to allow the Five Ascetics see him and welcome him as he entered the Deer Park. This stupa was probably erected to commemorate that event.





**Plate 27:** Front view of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara showing its unique design



**Plate 28:** Chaukhandi Stupa is the first monument one sees on entering Sarnath

## 4. Kushinagar, Place of the Mahaparinibbana

Kushinagar (Pali: Kusinara) is situated in the village of Kasia in Kushinagar District (formerly part of Deoria District) of Uttar Pradesh. The nearest town is Gorakhpur, 55 km away. By road, Kushinagar is 130 km south of Lumbini, 250 km east of Sravasti and 250 km north of Patna.

### 4.1 Religious Significance

Three months before the age of eighty, the Buddha renounced his will to live at the Capala Shrine in Vaishali. Traveling in stages via Pava where he ate his last meal offered by the smith **Cunda**, he reached the final resting place at the Sala grove of the Mallas by the bank of the Hirannavati River in Kushinagar. There on the full-moon day of Wesak in 543 BC, the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana, the passing away into Nibbana wherein the elements of clinging do not arise (i.e. no more rebirth). His last convert was the wandering ascetic Subhadda and his last words to the bhikkhus were: “*Handa ‘dani bhikkhave amantayami vo: Vaya-dhamma sankhara. Appamadena sampadetha.*” (Translation: “Indeed, *bhikkhus*, I declare this to you: It is the nature of all conditioned things to perish. Accomplish all your duties with mindfulness.”)

The Buddha was lying on his right side between two Sala trees with his head to the north when he breathed his last. After his Mahaparinibbana, his body was taken into the town by the northern gate and out through the eastern gate to the consecration ground of the Mallas called Makutabandhana. They were unable to light the funeral pyre until Ven. Maha Kassapa came and paid his respects.

After the cremation, the Buddha's ashes were divided into eight equal portions by the brahmin Dona, who distributed them to the eight clans, who came to claim their share of the relics, namely:

- King Ajatasattu of Magadha,
- the Licchavis of Vesali,
- the Sakyans of Kapilavastu,
- the Bulians of Allakappa,
- the Koliyans of Ramagama,
- the Brahman of Vethadipa,
- the Mallas of Pava and
- the Mallas of Kushinagar.

Dona himself kept the jug (*tumbha*) used for dividing the relics. When the Moriyas of Pippalavana arrived, it was too late as all the relics had been distributed, so they took from there the ashes of the cremation pyre. Returning home, these men raised stupas to honour them. So it came about that there were eight stupas for the relics, a ninth for the jug, and a tenth for the ashes.

## 4.2 Historical Background

During the Buddha's time, Kushinagar was described by Venerable Ananda as "*this little mud-walled town, this backwoods town, this branch township*". After the Mahaparinibbana of the Buddha, it became an important religious centre as Buddhism spread in India. As one of the four pilgrimage places mentioned by the Buddha, it attracted devout Buddhists from all over India and abroad. King Asoka visited Kushinagar in 249 BC and raised several stupas and pillars at the site. But by the time Xuanzang visited Kushinagar in 637 AD, the place was in ruins and its towns and villages waste and desolate with few inhabitants. He saw the Sala trees under which the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana, the vihara containing the Reclining Buddha image and beside it the 61 m tall stupa built by Asoka-rajā, in a



ruinous state with a stone pillar in front. Further to the north, after crossing the Hirannavati river was a stupa marking the cremation site. Yet Kushinagar continued to be a living shrine until the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD but after the Muslim conquest of India, it became deserted and eventually fell into ruins and was forgotten.

After a silence of more than 500 years, **Alexander Cunningham**, the Archaeological Surveyor who had the deep insight into Buddhist geography visited Kasia and identified the ruins at Kushinagar in the course of his visit in 1861-62. The local names of the ruins and mounds engaged his attention. The main site was called **Matha-kuar-ka-kot** or fort of Matha-kuar, who according to local belief was represented in the large stone image of a seated Buddha image lying unsheltered on a low mound near by. A kilometre and a half to the east stood the large hillock of brick ruins locally known by the name of **Ramabhar Tila** (or mound).

It was difficult for Cunningham to read the correct historical significance behind these names, but he correctly interpreted the name Mathakuar as '**Mathakumar**' to mean the '**dead prince**', thus referring by implication to Buddha who belonged to the princely family of Sakyas of Kapilavastu and died at the place. Fifteen years later Cunningham's assistant **Carlleyle** carried out extensive digging at the site and completely exposed the great central stupa and, most important of all, discovered, right at its front, the famous reclining statue of Buddha, the Nirvana statue buried in the debris of the ruins of an oblong shrine.

Though the location of ancient Kushinagar thus appeared to be quite certain, doubts were still raised about its accuracy. Better excavations were therefore, undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1904-07 under **J. P. R. Vogel** and others. These excavations yielded irrefutable proofs of the identity of Kushinagar and of the monuments in numerous inscriptions in the form of seals and a copper plate, the former referring to the

Mahaparinibbana Vihara and latter to the Mahaparinibbana Stupa itself. Although none of these records makes any direct mention of the name of Kushinagar, Brahmi writings on the copper plate stated that: “The Lord Buddha passed away here on this site” confirming it as the place of the Buddha’s Mahaparinibbana.

In recent times, the first Buddhist to occupy Kushinagar was **Ven. Mahavira**, an Indian national who was ordained as a monk in Sri Lanka in 1890. He was responsible for restoring Kushinagar back to its rightful place as a sacred shrine. Ven. Mahavira repaired the main temple and built a vihara in 1902-03. After him came **Ven. U Chandramani** from Sittwe in Rakkhine State, Myanmar. He met Ven. Mahavira in 1895 while studying in Calcutta. Impressed by the keenness of the young monk, Ven. Mahavira made arrangements to sponsor his studies in India and Burma. Upon completion he returned to Kushinagar to assist Ven. Mahavira.

After the demise of his predecessor, Ven. U Chandramani continued the noble work. Although he failed to secure the management of the Mahaparinibbana Temple, the Indian Government granted him permission to look after the articles that were donated in the name of Lord Buddha, such as the Mahaparinibbana Buddha image, and he could manage them as necessary. Later he started educational institutions for the local people and reviving the tradition of Buddha Jayanti, which was celebrated for the first time in Kushinagar in 1924.

Ven. U Chandramani passed away in 1972 and was succeeded by his capable disciple, **Ven. U Gyaneshwar (U Nyanissara)**, a Myanmar monk who continues the noble task of taking care of the holy site. In 2002, the Myanmar Government awarded Bhaddanta Gyaneshwar the title ‘Aggamahapandita’ in recognition of his distinguished services and in November 2005, he was conferred the title ‘Aggamaha Sadhamma Jotikadhaja’ on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary.

## 4.3 Objects of Interest

### (i) The Mahaparinibbana Temple and the Reclining Buddha Image

The present Temple was built by the Indian Government in 1956 on the 2500<sup>th</sup> year of the Mahaparinibbana or 2500 BE (Buddhist Era). The old temple restored by **Carlleyle** was too small to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims visiting it.

Inside this temple, one can see the famous Reclining Buddha image lying on its right side with the head to the north. The statue is 6.1 m long and rests on a 7.3 m long stone plinth or couch. On the front side of the couch are three sculptures. The figure near the feet is believed to represent Ven. Ananda weeping with grief on hearing that the Blessed One was about to pass away. The figure in the middle is believed to represent Ven. Subhadda, the last disciple of the Buddha. The figure with long hair near the face of the Buddha is believed to represent a Malla chief paying homage at the feet of the Blessed One.

At the centre is an inscription of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, which states the statue was, “*a gift of the monk Haribala to the Mahavihara and that it was fashioned by Dinna*”. This 1500-year old Reclining Buddha image was executed out of one block of red sandstone brought in from Mathura during the Gupta period. It was Carlleyle who discovered it in 1876 in a dilapidated condition and successfully pieced together the fragments found scattered about. This statue bears the 32 marks of the Great Man (*Mahapurisa*) and can evoke different feelings in one’s mind, depending on where one stands to look at it.

- When viewed at an angle above the head, one can discern a serene mood in the face as shown in the photo below
- When view from the lower part of the statue, one can discern a mood of suffering in the facial features.



**Plate 29:** From view of the Mahaparinibbana Temple in Kushinagar



**Plate 30:** The Mahaparinibbana Stupa is the huge bell-shaped dome shown here behind the Temple. It was renovated by Sayadaw U Chandramani in 1927.



**Plate 31:** Reclining Buddha image inside the Mahaparinibban Temple. When viewed from the lower part of the statue, one can discern a mood of suffering in the facial features.



**Plate 32:** When image is viewed at the head, one can discern a serene mood in the face, evoking the Bliss of Peace (santisukha) of the final liberation as the Buddha passes into Mahaparinibbana, the complete cessation of all suffering!

## (ii) Mahaparinibbana Stupa

This stupa beside the Mahaparinibbana Temple is a restoration of the Main stupa exposed during excavations by Carlleyle in 1876. When examined to a depth of 4.3 m, it revealed a copper plate and other objects from the Gupta period. The inscription on the plate in Sanskrit mentioned that the monk Haribala deposited these objects in the Nirvana stupa. Xuanzang, who visited Kusinara in 637 AD, mentioned that the Nirvana stupa was built by King Asoka. He also saw in front of it, a stone pillar to record the Nirvana of the Tathagata but it bore no date. The Nirvana stupa, is believed to be have been erected originally by the Mallas, to enshrine the Buddha's relics, and subsequently enlarged by King Asoka and later during the Gupta period. The Mahaparinibbana stupa was renovated in 1927 with donations of a Myanmar devotee, U Po Kyo, and is 23 m tall.

## (iii) Cremation Stupa or Makuta-bandhana Cetiya

After paying homage to the body of the Buddha for six days, the Mallas carried it to the **Makuta-bandhana**, the traditional place for consecrating their chieftains, where they cremated it. The cremation ceremony is described in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, which also describes the partitioning of the Buddha's relics by the brahmin Dona. The Cremation stupa was raised by the Mallas some time after the Buddha's cremation and repaired in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC by Asoka and again in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD during the reign of Gupta King Kumaragupta.

When Cunningham visited the site in 1861-62, it was just a big mound called **Ramabhar Tila** built of large bricks and stood about 15m above the fields. (Note: When Cunningham discovered the place, the Hindus had erected a temple dedicated to the Hindu

deity **Ramabhar Bhavani** at the site. Although the temple was removed later, the stupa is still known as '**Ramabhar**' to the locals).

This huge brick stupa consists of a circular drum 34m in diameter resting on a 47m-diameter platform. During excavations in 1910 and later in 1956, a large number of clay seals inscribed with Buddhist verses were discovered which confirmed that it was the cremation site. It is located about 1.6 km east of the Mahaparinibbana Temple along the main road.



**Plate 33:** After the Buddha had passed away, his body was cremated at the Makuta-bandhana Cetiya, the traditional consecration ground of the Malla chiefs. A stupa was raised by Mallas over the cremation site, which was later enlarged by various kings over the centuries to its present size shown above.

### (iii) **Matha Kuar (Mathakumar) Shrine**

Regarding the name **Mathakuar**, Cunningham was correct when he interpreted it as **Mathakumar** to mean ‘**dead prince**’, thus referring by implication to the Buddha who was a prince and died at the place. According to Ven. Pimbure Samitha Thero of the Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple in Kushinagar, Lord Buddha took a brief rest at the site of the Matha Kuar shrine before proceeding to the Upavattana Sala Grove where he entered Mahaparinibbana. Here he preached the Dhamma to his disciples and said that he too was a human being subject to old age and various kinds of diseases in this world, in order to arouse urgency in them. But he reminded that he had gained supreme knowledge and wisdom surpassing any other being in this world. This place is now called **Matha Kuar** and a shrine has been erected and installed with a 3.05-m tall statue Buddha carved out of one block of blue stone from the Gaya region. It is about 1,000 years old. In 1927 Ven. U Chandramani built the present temple out of the donations of two Myanmar devotees, U Po Kyo and U Po Hlaing.

**H. B. W. Garrick**, an assistant of Cunningham, who visited the place in 1880-81 reported as follows: “This statue is set up lately by the local authorities at a distance of about 400 yards from the Main Temple and is called by the villagers ‘Matha Kuar’. It is now very devoutly worshipped by many sects of Hindus, who bring offerings of ghee and betel with which they besmear the face and sprinkle the figure; there is also to be seen, occasionally, a profuse supply of flower garlands about it. The Nirvana figure is also an object of worship, but there are iron gates to the chamber where it is enshrined, which can only be opened to worshippers on the payment of a fee; and that being an expensive luxury, it is indulged in by few amongst the wealthier classes, and the ascetic Buddha's popularity is chiefly owing to its being situated in the open air, unguarded by priests and accessible without payment.”





**Plate 34:** Mathakumar Shrine or Shrine of the Dead Prince in Kushinagar.



**Plate 35:** Inside the shrine is a 3m tall Buddha image in earth-touching posture

**(v) The Conversion of Dr. Ambedkar into Buddhism by  
Venerable Sayadaw U Chandramani on 14 Oct 1956**

The most memorable event in the Buddhist world in modern times was the conversion of 380,000 Dalits (Untouchables) into Buddhism under the leadership of **Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar**. This historic event took place on 14 October 1956 at a 14-acre vacant plot of land now known as '**Diksha Bhumi**' in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The person chosen by Dr. Ambedkar to be his Dhamma Guru and administer the Three Refuges and Five Precepts was none other than **Sayadaw U Chandramani** of Kushinagar, whom Dr. Ambedkar regarded as his true mentor.

The Nagpur conversion was the greatest peaceful conversion in mankind because never in the history of any religion in the world has so many people at one time and at the instance of one man, voluntarily changed their religion. To commemorate this historic event, a shrine was built at the Kushinagar Burmese Temple where Sayadaw U Chandramani was Abbot. Inside the shrine, one sees a statue of Dr. Ambedkar kneeling in front of a statue of Sayadaw U Chandramani, depicting his initiation as a lay disciple. Two months later, Dr. Ambedkar passed away in New Delhi.

As shown in the accompanying photos, the shrine is always locked to prevent vandalism. According to the current Abbot Sayadaw Bhaddanta Nyanissara, the local Hindus felt insulted to see the statue of Dr. Ambedkar, the first Law Minister of India, kneeling in supplication to a Buddhist monk and they would enter the shrine and cause damage to the statues. So all the doors and windows have iron bars to prevent vandals from throwing stones at the statues to cause damage.



**Plate 36:** Statue of Sayadaw U Chandramani inside the shrine at the Burmese Temple commemorating the mass conversion of Dalits in Nagpur, Maharashtra



**Plate 37:** Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar kneeling to his spiritual mentor, Sayadaw U Chandramani who administered the Taking of Refuge and the Five Precepts.

## **PART III**

### **The Four Places of Miracles**

#### **Contents**

1. Sravasti, Place of the Twin Miracle
2. Sankasia, Place of Descent from Heaven
3. Rajgir, Place of the Taming of the Drunken Elephant  
Nalagiri
4. Vaishali, Place where the Buddha Renounced the Will  
to Live on

# 1. Sravasti, Place of the Twin Miracle

Sravasti (Pali: Savatthi) is located in the Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh, 160 km east of the capital Lucknow.

## 1.1 Religious Significance

Sravasti (Pali: Savatthi) was the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Kosala ruled by King Pasenadi, a lay disciple and great admirer of the Buddha. It owes its fame to its long, close association with the Buddha's ministry. Of the 45 years of his ministry, the Buddha spent 25 rains-retreats or vassas, 24 of them continuously (21<sup>st</sup>-44<sup>th</sup>) at Sravasti. It was here that the millionaire Sudatta, popularly known as Anathapindika or "Feeder of the Poor", donated the famous Jetavana or Jeta's Grove to the Buddha after he had bought it at an exorbitant price, of "as many gold coins as would cover it". Since the Buddha spent a major part of his missionary life in Sravasti, the majority of sermons in the scriptures were delivered while staying in Jetavana. Another important monastery at Sravasti was the Pubbarama, donated by Lady Visakha, chief benefactress of the Buddha.

The story of how Anathapindika came to meet the Buddha is narrated in *Vinaya Cullavagga Kh.* VI, 4. It was after the third rainy season that Anathapindika visited his brother-in-law while on business in Rajgir. Instead of the usual hearty welcome, he found the latter busy in the backyard making preparations for a feast. On enquiring, he was told that the preparations were for offerings to the Buddha and Sangha the next day. Just hearing the word 'Buddha' aroused great joy in Anathapindika and he longed to see the Buddha. As he was told that the Buddha was staying in Sitavana (Cool Grove) nearby and that he could see the Buddha the next day, he went to sleep. His thoughts were so bent upon the Buddha that thrice that night he arose thinking that it was dawn.

Owing to his great faith in the Buddha, light emanated from his body making him think that it was dawn. He went to the Sivaka gate and as soon as he was out of the city, the light left him. It was pitched dark and fear arose in him. He thought of turning back but the Yakkha Sivaka himself invisible, urged him on. His fear vanished, light appeared again and he continued his journey. For a second and third time the same thing happened and the Yakkha likewise encouraged him on. Then he arrived at Sitavana where the Buddha was. At that time, the Buddha had risen at early dawn and was engaged in walking meditation in the open. When he saw Anathapindika coming, he called him by his family name ‘Sudatta’, to his presence. Anathapindika was pleased to hear the Buddha address him by this name, as no one other than his family members knew it. After paying respects to the Buddha and hearing the Dhamma, he became a Sotapanna. Thereupon he invited the Buddha to spend the rainy season in Sravasti.



Sravasti became an important place of pilgrimage because here the Buddha performed the greatest miracle of all, the **Twin Miracle** (*Yamaka Pathihariya*), in order to dispel the heretics. In a series of miraculous episodes, the Buddha created multiple images of himself, seated and standing on lotuses, causing fire and water to emanate from his body. This marvelous event, called the “**Miracle of Sravasti**” is a favourite subject of Buddhist art.

## 1.2 Historical Background

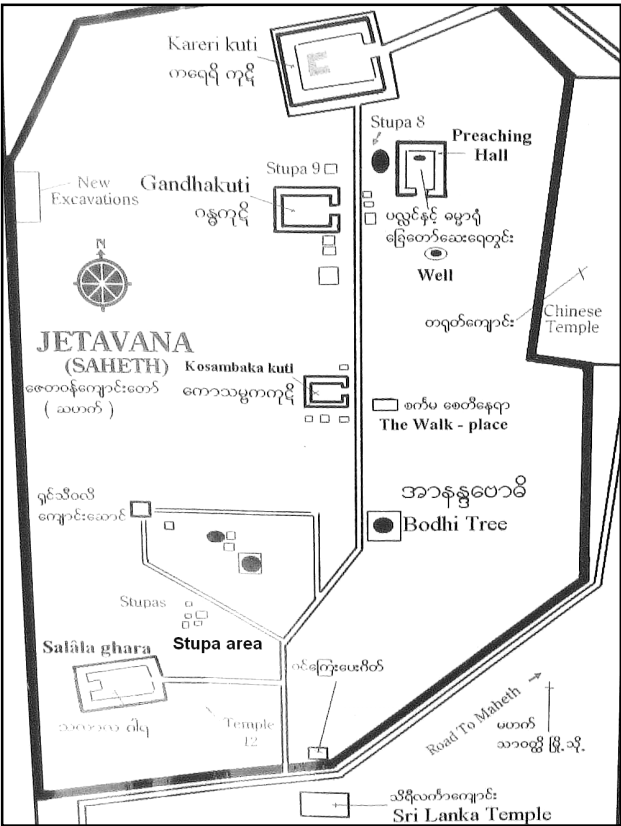
King Asoka visited Sravasti in 249 BC as part of his pilgrimage to the holy Buddhist shrines and erected two pillars, each 70 feet high, on both sides of the eastern gate of Jetavana, as well as some stupas to enshrine the relics of the Buddha. During the time of the Kushan kings, **Kaniska** and **Huviska**, in the 1<sup>st</sup>- 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, new shrines were installed to enshrine Buddha images which were becoming popular at the time.

When Faxian visited Sravasti in 407 AD, Buddhism had declined in the city but Jetavana was still occupied by monks. He saw the two Asokan pillars still standing but the stupas of Angulimala and Sudatta were in ruins. By the time Xuanzang came to Sravasti in 637 AD, the main city was in ruins and there were several hundreds of Sangharamas, mostly in ruins with very few religious followers. Jetavana was decayed and deserted. He also saw both columns erected by Asoka, the ruins of stupas, sangharamas and the well from which the Buddha used to draw water for his use. After Xuanzang's visit, Jetavana was re-occupied, as evidenced by the recovery of seals and images of Mahayanist pantheons such as Lokanatha, Avalokitesvara and others belonging to the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The last patrons of Jetavana were **King Govindachandra** and his devout Buddhist wife **Kumaradevi** of Kanauj and Benares (1130 AD). Records of their gift of six villages to the Sangha of Jetavana monastery were found in a copper charter discovered during excavation of the ruins. With the downfall of Buddhism in India in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Jetavana shrines became deserted and fell into oblivion.

In 1863, **Cunningham** identified a vast collection of twin ruins called **Sahet-Mahet** with the ancient city of Sravasti. He excavated the ruins at Sahet covering 13 hectares, identified with Jetavana and exposed the remains of several stupas, temples and monasteries, including the site of the famous **Gandha kuti** or Perfumed Chamber as well as the **Kosambi kuti**, both used by the

Buddha. Most of the ruins exposed in Jetavana were from the Kushan period (1<sup>st</sup>- 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD). The ruins at Mahet are very extensive, spreading over 162 hectares. Only a few ruins have been identified while most parts of it are still unexplored.

In recent times, the first monastery to be built in Sravasti was the Burmese Vihara, at the initiative of **Ven. Chandramani** of Kushinagar. **Ven. Ren Chen** followed his example and founded the Chinese Buddhist Temple. In 1969, the Maha Bodhi Society of India became directly involved with Sravasti with the arrival of **Ven. Sangharatana** of Sarnath, who initiated the construction of the Nava Jetavana Vihara just outside the old Jetavana. In 1982, the Thais too, established a vihara in Sravasti.



Ground Plan of Jetavana. (Photo from the Burmese Monastery, Sravasti)



## 1.3 Objects of Interest

### (i) Jetavana Park

During the Buddha's time, the place was called Jetavana Anathapindika arama or Anathapindika's monastery of Jeta Grove. To-day most of the ruins are the remains of temples and stupas from Kushan period (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD). There are several stupas built in memory of the Great Disciples of the Buddha such as the Venerables Sariputta, Mogallana, Sivali, Ananda and Rahula scattered all over Jetavana. The important shrines are:

- **The Ananda Bodhi Tree**

The Ananda Bodhi tree is located near the entrance of Jetavana. It was planted at the request of Anathapindika so that the laity would have an object to worship during the Buddha's absence from Sravasti to propagate the *Dhamma* after each *vassa*. When Ven. Ananda reported the matter to the Buddha, the latter replied that there were **three types of objects of veneration**, namely: (1) The corporeal relics deposited in a *stupa* after the Buddha's *Parinibbana*, (2) An object of use by the Buddha such as his alms bowl, etc., (3) A visible symbol such as a Dhammacakka wheel.

The first was not possible while the Buddha was alive, while the third object was not appropriate for those who were not content with a mere symbol or picture. So only the second remained and the Buddha suggested the Bodhi tree as the best object to venerate in his absence. So it was decided to plant a small shoot of the Bodhi tree from Bodhgaya. Ven. Mogallana, foremost in psychic ability, was assigned the task of obtaining the sapling. When it was obtained, Anathapindika planted the young shoot at the gate of Jetavana. The tree grew and became an object of veneration to the laity. At the request of Ven Ananda, the Buddha spent one night meditating under it, adding sanctity to the tree. The present tree looks very old from its hoary appearance but it is not possible to confirm whether it is the original tree or a descendant of it.



**Plate 38:** The Ananda Bodhi tree is a favourite shrine of pilgrims when they enter Jetavana. Most pilgrims circumambulate the tree as a mark of respect.



**Plate 39:** On entering the ancient ruins after the Ananda Bodhi tree, the first shrine on the left is believed to mark the very spot where the original Kosambi kuti, built by Anathapindika for the personal use of the Buddha, once stood. Just across it is a raised brick platform to mark the site of the *cankama*, where the Buddha practiced walking meditation.

- **The Kosambi kuti**

This temple is believed to be the site of the original **Kosambi kuti**, first built by Anathapindika earlier for the Buddha's use as a meditation room. Just in front of it is a long plinth, made of bricks, marking the site of the original promenade (cankama) used by the Buddha for walking meditation.

- **The Gandha kuti**

The ruins here mark the site of the **Gandha kuti** (Perfumed Chamber) built by Anathapindika for the Buddha's residence. According to the Buddhavamsa Commentary, the space covered by the four bedposts of the Buddha's Gandha kuti in Jetavana is one of the four avijahitatthānāni or **places that do not vary** for all Buddhas. The original Gandha kuti was wooden but by the time the Chinese pilgrims saw it, the structure was a two-storied brick building in a ruinous condition. Now only the low walls and stone platform are extant. This is a favourite site for pilgrims to pay homage to the Triple Gem (*puja*) and meditate.



**Plate 40:** The ruins shown above marks the original site of the Gandha kuti built by Anathapindika for the official residence of the Buddha.



**Plate 41:** The Gandha kuti is the most revered shrine in Jetavana. This photo taken on the eve of Kathina 2002 shows some Sri Lankan devotees decorating the shrine with plastic cups filled with rose petals.



**Plate 42:** Photo of the Group of Eight Stupas in the stupa area at Jetavana

## • The Group of Eight Stupas

The area to the east and northeast of the Salala-ghara (where King Pasenadi donated a monastery) seems to have been specially utilized for the erection of stupas. Important stupas such as those of the Arahants Sariputta, Moggallana and Sivali are found here.

### (ii) The Sudatta Stupa

North of Jetavana, in the ruins of Mahet (old Sravasti city) stands the **Sudatta stupa**, the most imposing monument in the area. According to Fa Hsien, this stupa was built on the foundations of the house of Sudatta, popularly known as Anathapindika. The ruins show structural remains from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. From the road, one has to climb up several flights of steps to reach the plinth, where one can see the sunken basements of two circular stupas.



**Plate 43:** Picture shows the imposing Sudatta Stupa at Mahet, situated about ½ kilometer from Jetavana. This stupa was built over the foundations of the house of the Buddha’s chief benefactor Sudatta, popularly known as Anathapindika, or “Feeder of the Destitute.”





**Plate 44:** At the top of the Sudatta Stupa is a grand plinth, from which one can see the basements of two circular stupas, furnishing the only evidence that this is a Buddhist structure.



**Plate 45:** The Angulimala Stupa at Mahet showing the opening of a tunnel cut through it to prevent flooding and damage during the rainy season. It is believed that the stupa marks the site where Ven. Angulimala was cremated.

### (iii) The Angulimala Stupa

Near the Sudatta stupa in Mahet, is a mass of bricks with a tunnel in the middle, identified by Cunningham as the **Angulimala stupa** seen by the Chinese pilgrims. The tunnel was cut through the whole mound at the base by the Archaeological Survey of India to serve as a drain for floodwaters during the rainy season, helping to preserve the monument. According to Fa Hsien, the stupa marks the site where Angulimala was cremated. Locals often mistake the tunnel for a cave and will tell visitors that it is Angulimala's cave.

### (v) The Stupa of the Great Miracle

According to the Commentaries, the Buddha ascended to Tavatimsa Heaven to preach to his mother during the seventh rains-retreat. Prior to his ascent, he had performed the **Twin Miracle** (*Yamaka Pathihariya*) and other miraculous feats to silence the heretics at a place where the gardener **Ganda** had planted a mango tree. This place is believed to be at the top of a hillock near the Nikko Lotus Hotel as one enters Sravasti.

When the author first visited the place in 1991, it appeared like a natural hill covered with trees, creepers and bushes. At that time, Sayadaw U Awbatha, abbot of the Burmese Vihara mentioned that it was an important stupa. In the year 2000, excavations were carried out on this hillock, which revealed the remains of a brick stupa believed to be erected by King Asoka. The area has now been fenced up to protect the ruins of the Miracle stupa on top of the hillock. This stupa is known locally as '**Orajhar**'.



**Plate 46:** This hillock opposite the Nikko Lotus Hotel in Sravasti is believed to be the ‘Miracle Hill’ where the Buddha displayed the Twin Miracle in order to silence the heretics. At the top is a brick stupa believed to be built by Asoka, to commemorate the great miracle. It is named ‘Orajhar’ by the locals.



**Plate 47:** Picture shows the brick structure of the stupa at the top of Miracle Hill in Sravasti.



## 2. Sankasia, Place of Descent from Heaven

Sankasia is located in the village of **Sankisa-Basantapur** in district of Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh. From Agra, Sankasia is 175km via the Firozabad-Shikohabad-Mainpuri-Bewar-Pakhna.

### 2.1 Religious Significance

According to the Dhammapada Commentary on Verse 181, after the Buddha performed the Twin Miracle at Sravasti to dispel the challenges of the heretics, he ascended to Tavatimsa heaven. His previous mother, who had been reborn in Tusita heaven as the deva Santusita, also came to Tavatimsa heaven. There the Buddha expounded the Abhidhamma to the devas and brahmas throughout the three months of the vassa. As a result, Santusita deva became a sotapanna, as did numerous other devas and brahmas.

During that period, Venerable Sariputta spent vassa (3 months rains retreat) at Sankasia 30 yojanas (1 yojana = 13 km) away from Sravasti. During his stay there, as regularly instructed by the Buddha, he taught the Abhidhamma to his 500 pupils staying with him and covered the whole course by the end of vassa. Towards the end of vassa, Venerable Maha Moggalana went to Tavatimsa heaven to see the Buddha and was told that the Buddha would return to the human world on the full moon day at the end of vassa to the place where Venerable Sariputta was spending vassa.

After the Buddha had completed the rains-retreat in **Tavatimsa Heaven**, he informed Sakka Devaraja of his intention to return to earth. Thereupon, Sakka created three ladders; one of gold, one of jewels and one of silver, the tops of which rested on the summit of Mt. Sumeru and the feet of which rested against the gate of the city of Sankasia. On the right side was the golden ladder for the Devas, on the left side was the silver ladder for Maha Brahma and

his train, and in the middle was the jewelled ladder for the Buddha. As the Buddha descended upon the jewelled ladder, Devas and Brahmas accompanied him on each side, with Maha Brahma holding a parasol in honor. With this retinue, the Buddha descended and set foot on earth at the gate of the city of Sankasia.

A large gathering headed by Venerable Sariputta welcomed the Buddha back to this world and the whole town was lit up. Venerable Sariputta was awed by the grandeur and glory of the whole scene of the Buddha's return. He respectfully approached the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir! We have never seen or even heard of such magnificent and resplendent glory. Indeed, Venerable Sir, you are loved, respected and revered alike by devas, brahmas and men!" To him the Buddha said, *"My son Sariputta, the Buddhas who are endowed with unique qualities are truly loved by men and devas alike."*

Then the Buddha spoke in verse as follows:

The wise who practise jhana concentration and Insight Meditation take delight in the peace of liberation from sensual pleasures and moral defilements. Such wise and mindful ones, who truly comprehend the Four Noble Truths (i.e., Arahants and Buddhas) are held dear also by the devas. (Dhammapada Verse 181)

Because of this miraculous event, which was witnessed by a great multitude, Sankasia became an important Buddhist shrine and several stupas and viharas were erected there.

## 2.2 Historical Background

King Asoka visited Sankasia as part of his itinerary of pilgrimage in 249 BC. According to Faxian (5<sup>th</sup> century AD), Asoka built a shrine over the spot where the Buddha set foot on earth. Behind

the shrine, he raised a stone column 18.3 m high with a lion capital on top and on its four sides, placed Buddha images.

Faxian reported that there were about a thousand monks and nuns who all received their food from the common store, and belonged, some to the greater vehicle and some of the lesser one. He spent one vassa in Sankasia and described the presence of many Buddhist structures and monasteries including a sangharama containing 600-700 monks. When Xuanzang arrived in 636 AD, there were four sangharamas with about 1000 priests of the Sammitiya sect. To the east of the city 20 li or so, he saw the great sangharama of beautiful construction, wherein lived 100 monks and religious laymen. He also saw the Asoka column 21 m high with carved figures on the four sides and around it, and mentioned the presence of some stupas.

Other than these accounts of the Chinese pilgrims, the history of Sankasia remained blank for the next one thousand two hundred years until **Cunningham** identified it with the village of **Sankisa-Basantapur** in Farrukhabad District of Uttar Pradesh. The present site of Sankasia is situated on a high mound and there is a chain of other mounds spread outside the village. These mounds have yielded numerous silver and copper punch marked coins during excavations, mostly tribal coins of the Panchala kings and copper coins of the Kushan rulers. Large bricks measuring 28 cm by 15 cm bearing Brahmi inscriptions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC were also discovered.

### 2.3 The Pristine Environment of Sankasia

Today Sankasia is the one of the most remote and undeveloped Buddhist shrines in India, a far cry from the Buddha's time when it was called 'City of Sankasia'. When India's **Prime Minister Nehru** was asked by some Japanese visitors in 1961, which was the poorest Buddhist shrine in India, he promptly replied:

“Sankasia!” The situation has improved slightly since **Ms Mayawati**, a Buddhist laywoman became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in May 2007 again after a brief term in 2002-03. Now the roads are getting better and a new hotel is being built to accommodate tourists in Sankasia.

The author first visited Sankasia in 1999. Impressed by its pristine environment, he decided to lead Malaysian pilgrims there regularly. In the beginning, the journey from Delhi would take the whole day. The group would leave Sankasia in the evening and travel to Kanpur or Lucknow arriving at the hotel well after midnight. When the pilgrims’ hostel in the Burmese Temple was completed in 2004, **Sayadaw U Nanda** invited us to stay overnight there instead of leaving in the evening. It proved to be a very pleasant experience. We had the opportunity to know Sayadaw U Nanda well and benefit from his vast knowledge of the history of Sankasia. Now more pilgrims will get to know the rich heritage of Sankasia.

## 2.4 The Buddhist Population around Sankasia

According to **Sayadaw U Nanda**, resident monk of the Burmese vihara, when Lord Buddha descended from Heaven at the gate of Sankasia city after his 7th Vassa (about 2600 years ago) a group of Sakyans nobles came to witness the miracle and settled in Sankasia. After **Vidhadabu** attacked Kapilavastu and massacred the Sakyans, many escaped to India and migrated to Sankasia. Today there are over one quarter million of their descendants living in the districts around Sankasia. Every year during **Pavarana** (Invitation) on the full-moon day of October, a great congregation of local Buddhists, assemble at Sankasia to commemorate the Buddha’s Descent from Heaven.

In the early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD when Faxian was at Sankasia, he heard of a dispute between the Brahmins and the Sramanas (Bhikkhus) over land rights in Sankasia. According to him, the latter were losing the argument. Then both sides took an oath that if the place did indeed belong to the Sramanas, there should be some supernatural proof of it. When these words were spoken, the stone lion on top of the nearby Asokan pillar gave a great roar. Witnessing this, their opponents were frightened, bowed to the decision, and withdrew. Eventually the Brahmins appeared to have succeeded in ousting the Buddhists from their lands, because by the time of Xuanzang's visit, he reported: "*There were only four viharas with about one thousand monks of the Sammitiya School. There were ten Deva temples, where sectarians of all beliefs lived. They all honour and sacrifice to Mahesvara.*"

So it is very likely that at some early period, perhaps before Xuanzang's visit, the Buddhists of Sankasia many of whom were Sakyans, might have moved out of Sankasia and settled in the surrounding villages. Many of them join the October full-moon celebration (Pavarana) as another traditional festival of their ancestors. They are ignorant of their historical ties with Buddhism. Sayadaw U Nanda, who is fluent in Hindi, has started a Sunday school to educate the younger generation about their roots by teaching them the history of their ancestral religion.

## **Objects of Interest**

### **(i) The Broken Asoka Column with Elephant Capital**

The Elephant Capital that once surmounted the Asoka column is an important relic of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. It is kept in a fenced up pavilion. Nearby under a tree, is a small shrine with a standing image of Lord Buddha, flanked by Brahma and Sakka to depict the Buddha's descent from Heaven.

## (ii) The Site where the Buddha Descended from Heaven

About 20 metres to the south of the Asokan pillar is a high mound composed of solid brickwork, which was once a Buddhist structure. This mound was 6 metres high and 49 metres in diameter at its base. Cunningham identified it with the position of the three flights of ladders by which the Buddha descended from Heaven attended by Brahma and Sakka. According to Xuanzang, when the ladders by which the Buddha descended from Heaven had disappeared, the neighbouring princes built up new triple stairs of bricks and chased stones ornamented with jewels on the ancient foundation (three ladders) resembling the old ones. There was a vihara on the foundation and close by its side was a stone column 21m high, which was erected by Asoka-rajā. After the disappearance of Buddhism from India, the vihara probably followed the same fate of many other Buddhist establishments and fell into ruins. On top of the foundation now is a small shrine dedicated to a Hindu goddess Bisari Devi, built by a Hindu priest who has taken over the place sometime ago. This Hindu shrine on top of a Buddhist structure is a bone of contention between the Buddhists and Hindus in Sankasia.

When the author visited Sankasia in November 2003, the brickworks around the mound had fallen off due to heavy rains during the previous monsoon, revealing the bare earth. According to **Sayadaw U Nanda**, the resident monk of the Burmese vihara, this event may turn out to be a blessing for Buddhists because there are plans by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to carry out excavations of this ancient Buddhist site and develop it for more pilgrims to visit Sankasia. It will be interesting to see what ancient relics will be unearthed by the archaeologist's spade. For a long time, Sankasia has been by-passed by most present-day pilgrims in spite of its religious significance and the fact that it was an important shrine to the great pilgrims of the past like Asoka, Faxian and Xuanzang.

### (iii) The Burmese and Sri Lankan Viharas

The first Buddhist monk to reside in Sankasia was the Late Ven. **Vijaya Soma** from Sri Lanka who established a school there. It is indeed heartening to see two Buddhist monasteries now in Sankasia in spite of its remote location. The Burmese monastery was opened in the year 2000 while the Sri Lankan monastery was built a few years earlier. Pilgrims visiting Sankasia should visit these monasteries to pay their respects to the bhikkhus, whose presence have enhanced the sanctity of this rural environment. They will be able to obtain more information about the history of Sankasia from the monks who have lived there for many years.



**Plate 48:** The walls in the shrine hall of the Sri Lankan temple in Sankasia are decorated with murals depicting the Buddha's Descent from Heaven. This photo shows Sayadaw U Nanda (third from right), Abbot of the neighboring Burmese Vihara, explaining the details of this miraculous event to a group of Malaysian pilgrims when they visited Sankasia in 2006.



**Plate 49:** Rustic scene in Sankasia showing the shrine commemorating the Buddha’s Descent from Heaven. In the background is a pavilion displaying the famous Elephant Capital from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC



**Plate 50:** Inside the shrine are images depicting the Buddha’s Descent from Heaven, flanked by Sakkadevaraja and Maha Brahma holding a parasol.





**Plate 51:** This famous Elephant Capital dated 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC was discovered by Cunningham during archaeological excavations in Sankasia.



**Plate 52:** A 2002 photo showing the 6m high brick structure that was the remains of a Buddhist temple. Cunningham identified it as the place where the Buddha set foot at Sankasia upon his Descent from Heaven. In 2003, torrential rains during an unusually heavy monsoon completely destroyed the structure.



**Plate 53:** This was what was left of the brick structure in 2003 after torrential rains during an unusually heavy monsoon completely destroyed the structure.



**Plate 54:** By 2007 the brick structure had disappeared, leaving behind a mound of earth to remind us of the impermanent nature of all conditioned things.

### 3. Rajgir, Place of the Taming of the Drunken Elephant Nalagiri

Rajgir (Pali: Rajagaha) is situated in the Nalanda district of Bihar, 70 km northeast of Bodhgaya and 102 km south of Patna.

#### 3.1 Religious Significance

**Rajgir** is the modern name of **Rajagaha** or “royal abode”, an appropriate designation for a place that had remained as the capital of the powerful kingdom of **Magadha** for centuries. In the Buddha’s time, the ruler was King **Bimbisara**, who was later usurped by his parricidal son, **Ajatasattu**. In his first meeting with the **Bodhisatta**, Bimbisara was so impressed by his royal bearing that he offered to share his kingdom with him. The Bodhisatta, who had just renounced the world in search of the Deathless, declined the offer but promised to return to visit Rajgir after he had attained his goal. Soon after dispatching the Sangha to spread the Dhamma from Sarnath, the Buddha traveled to Uruvela, where he converted the Kassapa brothers and their matted-hair disciples, who all attained arahantship. With this retinue of a thousand arahants, the Buddha entered Rajgir where he received a warm welcome from the King. Thereupon he preached a sermon to King Bimbisara who became a Sotapanna. Next day he invited the Buddha to a meal and offered the **Bamboo Garden (Veluvana)** to the Buddha and the Sangha.

As the capital of a powerful state, Rajgir was a hive of secular and religious activities. According to the Samannaphala Sutta, many heretical teachers operated in Rajgir, namely: Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakudha Kaccayana, Nigantha Nattaputta and Sanjaya Belatthaputta. Among the disciples of Sanjaya were two rich brahmins, **Upatissa** and **Kolita**, popularly known as **Sariputta** and **Moggallana**

respectively. Both joined the Sangha after their conversion by the arahant **Assaji**, and became the Buddha's first and second Chief Disciples. Following their conversion, many paribbajakas or wandering ascetics also became followers of the Buddha. Among the laity, the most notable disciples were the royal physician **Jivaka**, adopted son of Prince Abhaya; and the millionaire **Upali**, a follower of Jain leader Nigantha Nattaputta, who was sent to convert the Buddha but ended up as a lay disciple instead. Thus Rajgir became an important centre of Buddhism as the fame of the Buddha spread throughout Magadha.

Rajgir was also the scene of many attempts by **Devadatta** to kill the Buddha over the leadership of the Sangha. First he hired archers to assassinate the Buddha, but they ended up by becoming disciples of the Buddha instead. Next, as the Buddha was walking up the slopes of Gijjhakuta (Vulture Peak) one day, Devadatta hurled a rock from the summit at the Buddha but it missed and a splinter wounded the Buddha's foot. Finally, he caused the elephant **Nalagiri** to be intoxicated with liquor and sent the ferocious beast to charge at the Buddha. When the elephant approached, **Venerable Ananda** stood in front of the Buddha to protect the Master. But the Buddha subdued the animal with his loving kindness.

Because of this miracle, Rajgir became sanctified as an important pilgrimage site. While Devadatta was plotting against the Buddha, **Ajatasattu**, at his instigation, usurped the throne and imprisoned his father in order to starve him to death. He regretted his actions too late, as his father had died before he could release him. Ajatasattu, later at the suggestion of Jivaka, sought the Buddha's advice and became a lay disciple. After the Buddha's Mahaparinibbana, he led an army to Kushinagar to claim a share of the Buddha's relics. He was the patron of the **First Sangiti** or Council held at **Sattapanni Cave** in Rajgir.

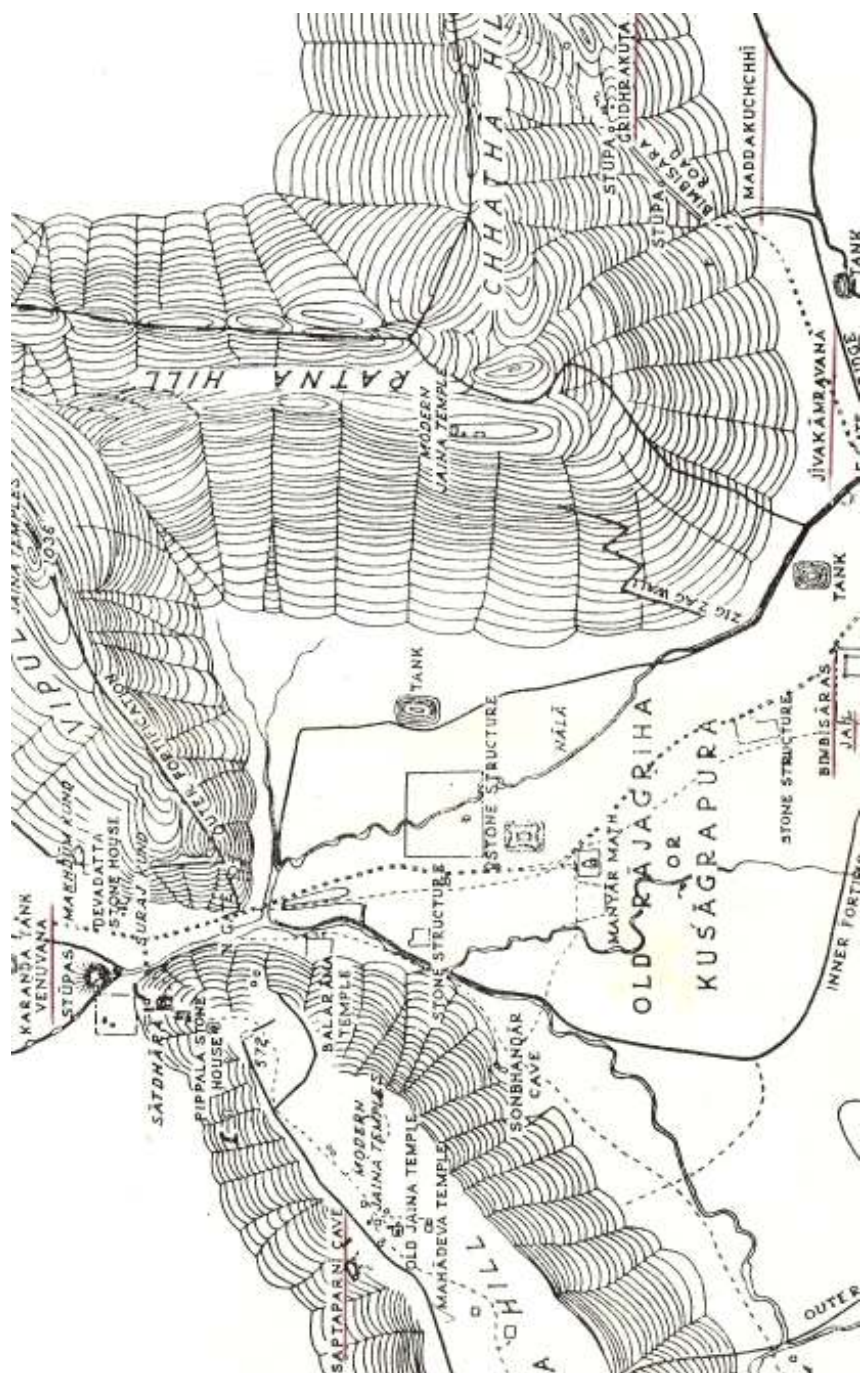
### 3.2 Historical Background

Rajgir lost its status after Ajatasattu's son, **Udayibhadda**, slew his father and transferred the capital to **Pataliputta** (modern day **Patna**). But the fact that Asoka erected a stupa and a stone pillar with an elephant capital during his pilgrimage to Rajgir shows that the place remained as an important Buddhist centre for centuries. When Faxian came during 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, he found the old city desolate but outside the hills at Veluvana, he found a group of monks living in the monastery. When Xuanzang visited Rajgir in 637-638 AD, it was practically deserted. Of the ancient monasteries and stupas, he found only foundation walls and ruins standing. He saw the Asoka stupa which was 18.3 m high and by the side of it, the Asokan pillar about 15.2 m high with an elephant capital, the Pippali stone house said to be the cave of Mahakassapa and the Sattapanni caves. He also visited Gijjhakuta and saw a brick vihara at the western end of the hill and several stupas in the vicinity.

Although there is no record of Rajgir after Xuanzang's visit, the antiquities recovered during archaeological excavations in 1905-06 showed that it continued to be a popular Buddhist shrine up to the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. According to Faxian, Ajatasattu built a new citadel outside the circle of 5 hills, namely: **Vebhara**, **Pandava**, **Vepulla**, **Gijjhakuta** and **Isigili** that encircled the old Rajagaha city. The modern village of Rajgir encloses a part of this 'New Rajagaha', which was protected by a massive wall of earth resembling an irregular pentagon in shape, with a circuit of 5 km. On the south, towards the hills, one can still see the stone fortifications that once protected the old city. The wall is 4.6 m to 5.5 m thick and rises to a height of 3.4 m at some places.

A map of Rajgir extracted from the publication "Rajgir" by the Archaeological Survey of India is shown overleaf in order to assist the reader on the locations of the various places of interest.





### 3.3 Objects of Interest

#### (i) Ajatasattu Stupa

At the entrance of Rajgir is a mound with stone pillars and some white cement graves. This is the Ajatasattu Stupa built by King Ajatasattu to enshrine his portion of the Buddha's relics obtained after the Buddha's Parinibbana in Kusinara. According to legend, Venerable Mahakassapa foresaw danger to the relics and advised Ajatasattu to move the relics to a new secret location. Thereafter it lost its importance and fell into ruins. When the Muslims conquered the area, they turned the site into Muslim graveyard.

#### (ii) Veluvana (Bamboo Grove) and Karanda Tank

When King Bimbisara heard that the Buddha had come to Rajgir with a retinue of one thousand arahants, he went to the Sapling Grove to meet the Buddha and was converted by the Buddha, attaining the First Stage of Sainthood. Thereafter, he invited the Buddha to his palace for the following day's meal, after which he donated the famous Bamboo Grove or Veluvana, the first donation of a park (arama), to the Buddha and Sangha.

When the writer first visited Veluvana in 1991, the place was slightly overgrown with bushes and on the south side towards the hot springs, a number of Muslim tombs could be seen on a large mound to the left of the main entrance. The cemetery is believed to be the site of the **Veluvana Vihara** built by Bimbisara for the Buddha's residence. The whole area has been cleaned up and Veluvana now looks like a pleasant park, planted with shade trees, bamboo and flowers. In the vicinity of Veluvana is a large pond with a Buddha image at the centre. This pond is believed to be the site of the **Karanda tank** mentioned in Buddhist text as the **Karanda kanivapa** where the Buddha used to take his bath.



**Plate 55:** The ruins of the abandoned Ajatasattu Stupa at the entrance of Rajgir has been turned into a Muslim cemetery with tombs painted white as shown.



**Plate 56:** Photo of the Squirrel's Feeding Ground of Veluvana. In the middle is a pond identified as the Karanda tank where the Buddha used to bathe in.





**Plate 57:** Pippali stone house as seen from the road at the foot of Vebhara hill



**Plate 58:** Close view of Pippali stone house, which used to be the residence of Ven. Maha Kassapa. Above it is a circular brick structure, probably the base of a stupa built to honor the great arahant known as the “Father of the Sangha”.

### (iii) Pippali Stone House

A short distance from Veluvana at the foot of **Vebhara** hill, are the hot springs of Rajgir, a popular picnic spot for bathing. A little above the hot springs, on the right side of the path uphill, is a remarkable stone structure known locally as the “**machan**” (watch tower). The structure is roughly cube-shaped with dimensions of 26 m feet long by 25 m wide by 7 m high and is built of unhewn blocks of stone set on the rock. According to **Sir John Marshall** who excavated the site in 1905-06, the structure was originally a watch-tower and “in after times, when no longer required for defensive purposes, they would afford convenient cells for ascetics to meditate in”. This structure is believed to be the **Pippali stone house**, residence of **Ven. Maha Kassapa**, Convenor of the First Council. The name ‘Pippali’ probably refers to the name of Mahakassapa before he became a monk. According to *Samyutta* V, 78, the Buddha visited Maha Kassapa on one occasion when the latter was ill and expounded the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, upon hearing which, Maha Kassapa recovered from the illness. According to *Samyutta* iii, 124, **Ven. Assaji** once stayed at Pippali House when he was sick.

### (iv) Sattapanni caves

The **Sattapanni** caves, site of the **First Buddhist Council** held three months after the Mahaparinibbana in 543 BC is situated on top of **Vebhara** hill, beyond the largest Jain temple. There a narrow footpath descends some 30 m to a long artificial terrace in front of a line of six caves (might have been seven originally). The caves have been sealed off to ensure the safety of visitors. The terrace in front of the caves is about 36.6 m long and 10.4 m at the widest point and part of the retaining wall of large unhewn stones on the outer edge can still be seen. This place agrees with

the description of Sattapanni found in the Pali texts where five hundred arahants convened to codify the Buddha's Teaching.

Over the last 2500 years, a lot of erosion would have taken place so the terrace was probably much wider in those days, to accommodate so many arahants.

### (v) **Bimbisara Jail**

About 2½ km south of Veluvana beside the main road, is an area about 60 m square enclosed by the remains of a stone wall 2 meters thick. This area has been identified as the prison in which King Bimbisara was jailed by his son Ajatasattu, who usurped the throne. It is said that from this prison, the king could see the Buddha up in Gijjhakuta, the sight of whom provided great joy to the prisoner.

### (vi) **Jivaka's mango garden (*Jivaka ambavana*)**

According to Pali sources, Jivaka's mango garden is situated between the city's East Gate and Gijjhakuta, and the site has been identified a short distance from the foot of Gijjhakuta. According to the Vinaya Texts, **Jivaka Komarabhacca** was the adopted son of **Prince Abhaya**, who found him alive (*jivati*) in a dust heap when he was an infant and raised him up. When he was old enough, he set out for Taxila to study medicine for 7 years. To test his knowledge, his teacher asked him to go all round Taxila to search for any plant, which was not medicinal and bring it back. Jivaka proved to be so proficient in medicinal plants that he returned after a long search and declared that he had not seen any plant that was not medicinal within a *yojana* (13 km) of Taxila.

Returning to Rajgir, he cured many people suffering from serious ailments and even performed surgery, something unheard of in those days. He became the leading physician and surgeon of Rajgir and earned great wealth through his medical practice. At some point in his career, he became a lay disciple and used to attend on the Buddha three times a day. When the Buddha's foot was injured by a splinter from a rock hurled by Devadatta, it was Jivaka who attended on him and healed the wound. Realizing the advantages of having a monastery near his home, Jivaka built one on his extensive mango garden and donated it to the Buddha. The site of this monastery was excavated recently, which exposed the buried foundations of elliptical buildings, possibly of monastic nature, of an early date.

### (vii) Gijjhakuta (Vulture Peak)

Gijjhakuta hill was the favourite resort of the Buddha and the scene of many important discourses while he was in Rajgir. To reach the top, one has to climb up a long stone stairway, 6.1 m to 7.3 m wide, called the **Bimbisara road**, built by the King to enable him to reach the summit to see the Buddha. The rocky path ends near the top of the hill where one can see two natural caves, which were probably used by the **Buddha** and **Ven. Ananda**. At the summit, one can see the huge granite rock formation resembling a vulture standing with folded wing, from which the hill derived its name. Recently, a cement staircase has been constructed to facilitate the pilgrim's climb to the top, which is a flat terrace surrounded by a low retaining wall with a shrine near the precipice. This spot offers a commanding view of the valley below. It is a favourite place for pilgrims to perform puja or circumambulate while reciting the virtues of the Buddha. Near the bottom of the cement staircase are two smaller caves, believed to have sheltered **Ven. Sariputta** and **Ven. Moggallana**.



**Plate 59:** From Phippali stone house, one has to climb the rocky path till the largest Jains temple is reached. From there a narrow path descend to Sattapanni



**Plate 60:** A long narrow terrace fronts a line of 6 caves (originally might be 7). Four of the caves are all in good conditioned but are sealed for safety reasons



**Plate 61:** Ruins of Bimbisara jail where King Bimbisara was imprisoned by his son Ajatasattu and starved to death. The jail measures 60 meters square with 2-meter thick walls. On the hill beside a white stupa is Gijjhakuta (Vulture Peak).



**Plate 62:** Ruins of monasteries at the Jivaka Mango grove in Rajagaha.





**Plate 63:** View of the Bimbisara road seen from the summit of Vulture Peak.



**Plate 64:** Just before the summit of Vulture Peak, one can see a large cave. It is believed that the Buddha used to meditate in this cave.



**Plate 65:** Near the cave, a staircase built for the convenience of pilgrims, leads to the summit, which has a wide cemented platform to accommodate pilgrims.



**Plate 66:** This shrine at Vulture Peak is the most popular spot in Rajgir where pilgrims perform puja. This is but natural as the place was the favorite resort of the Buddha and the scene of many of his important discourses.



## 4. Vaishali, Place where Buddha Renounced the Will to Live On

Vaishali (Pali: Vesali) is located around the village of Basarh in Hajipur District of Bihar, 55 km north of Patna across the Ganges.

### 4.1 Religious Significance

(i) **Vaishali** (Pali: **Vesali**) was the capital of the powerful Vajjian confederacy of eight clans, of whom the Licchavis and Videhans were the most important. It was the first republic in the world modeled on the **Aparihaniya Dhamma** or the seven conditions leading to welfare, which the Buddha taught to the Vajjians when he was dwelling at the Saranda shrine in Vaishali (see AN 7.21). Thus united, they became so powerful that **Ajatasattu** of Magadha had to resort to treachery by sending the brahmin **Vassakara** to sow discord among the Vajjian princes for three years in order to weaken them. By then, they were too disunited to defend their country and Ajatasattu conquered them.

(ii) The Buddha visited Vaishali several times, spending his 5th and 44th vassas there and many Licchavi nobles became his disciples. His first visit took place just before his 4th Vassa in Rajgir. At that time, Vaishali was plagued by famine, evil spirits and disease. In desperation, the Licchavi nobles went to Rajgir where the Buddha was staying to invite him to Vaishali and save their country from ruin. According to the **Paramatthajotika** (Commentary on the Khuddaka Nikaya), the Buddha traveled by boat up the Ganges to Vaishali. As soon as he crossed the Vaishalian boundary, they came to meet him in the river till the water was up to their necks. Soon after, a sudden torrential rain broke out. It caused a great flood that swept all the dead bodies into the Ganges till the land was cleansed of all the impurities.

Then the Licchavi nobles conducted the Buddha to Vaishali. As soon as the Blessed One arrived at Vaishali, Sakka Devaraja came with a host of devas. With the arrival of devas possessing such great influence, most of the evil spirits fled. Thereupon the Buddha delivered the **Ratana Sutta (Jewel Discourse)** to Venerable Ananda, and gave him instructions as to how he should tour the city with the Licchavi citizens reciting the discourse as a mark of protection to the people of Vaishali.

Ven. Ananda followed the Buddha's instructions, and sprinkled the sanctified water from the Buddha's own almsbowl on the city walls. As a consequence, all the evil spirits were exorcised and the pestilence subsided. Ven. Ananda returned with the citizens of Vaishali to the Public hall where the Buddha and his disciples had assembled awaiting his arrival. There the Buddha recited the same Jewel Discourse to the gathering. Sakka Devaraja who was in attendance with a host of devas, uttered the three final stanzas of the sutta in honor of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Then, keeping the Blessed One on his right, he returned to Tavatimsa heaven with the other devas. But the Buddha continued to preach the Ratana Sutta to the people of Vaishali for seven days.

(iii) At Vaishali, the Buddha allowed women to be admitted to the Sangha after **Ven. Ananda** successfully pleaded to the Buddha for the ordination of **Maha Pajapati Gotami** and five hundred Sakyan ladies. The Buddha then decreed the Eight Chief Rules, in addition to the Disciplinary Code observed by monks, which bhikkhunis or nuns "should revere, reverence, honour and respect for life and which should not be transgressed". Thus the **Bhikkhuni Sangha** came to be established in Vaishali.

(iv) Once the Buddha was staying in a mango grove of **Ambapali**, the chief courtesan of Vaishali who invited him to a house dana, forestalling the Licchavi nobles who then offered her

money in exchange for the invitation. But she politely declined their offer for she valued the dana more and after the meals, even donated her mango grove to the Buddha and Sangha. Later in her life, Ambapali became a bhikkhuni and attained arahantship.

(v) The Buddha spent the last vassa in Vaishali where he relinquished the will to live on at the Capala shrine. Earlier, Mara had appealed to him to enter Parinibbana as the Sasana had become successful, prosperous, famous and well-proclaimed by gods and men. He reminded the Buddha that it was time for the Blessed One to enter Parinibbana. When this was said, the Buddha answered Mara thus: Don't trouble yourself, Evil One. Before long, the Parinibbana of the Tathagata will come about. Three months hence, the Tathagata will pass away completely."

Thereupon came a **tremendous earthquake** and thunder rolled across the heavens. When Ven. Ananda felt the mighty tremors and rolling thunder, he was astonished and came to the Buddha and asked what was the cause of such a mighty earthquake.

## **Eight Causes of Earthquakes**

The Buddha answered that they were eight causes of earthquakes.

1. "This great earth is established upon liquid, the liquid upon the atmosphere and the atmosphere upon space. When mighty atmospheric disturbances occur, the liquid is agitated. With the agitation of the liquid, tremors of the earth arise. This is the first cause of mighty earthquakes.

2. "When an ascetic or holy man of great power who has developed psychic powers or a mighty and potent deity whose concentration of the earth-element consciousness is weak but his concentration of water-element consciousness is immeasurable, then he makes the earth shudder and shake and violently quake.

3-8. “When the Bodhisatta descends from Tusita Heaven and enters the mother’s womb, the earth shudders and shakes and violently quakes. This is the third reason. When the Bodhisatta emerges from the mother’s womb, the earth shudders and shakes and violently quakes. This is the fourth reason. When the Tathagata gains Supreme Enlightenment, the earth shudders and shakes and violently quakes. This is the fifth reason. When the Tathagata sets in motion the Wheel of the Law, the earth shudders and shakes and violently quakes. This is the sixth reason. When the Tathagata renounces the will to live on, the earth shudders and shakes and violently quakes. This is the seventh reason. When the Tathagata enters Parinibbana wherein no element of clinging remains, the earth shudders and shakes and violently quakes. This is the eighth reason.” (Mahaparinibbana Sutta, 3.10 – 3.20)

When Ven. Ananda realized that the Buddha had renounced the will to live on, he pleaded three times with the Buddha to live on till the end of his lifespan. But the Buddha refused by telling him that the time is past for such entreaty. He had already hinted three times to Ananda that, “whosoever has developed, practiced, employed, strengthened, maintained, scrutinized and brought to perfection the Four Constituents of Psychic Power, could, if he so desired, continue living his full lifespan. The Tathagata has done so and could, if he desired, remain until the end of his lifespan.”

The Buddha put the blame on Ven. Ananda for failing to take the hint although told to him three times. The Buddha could not go back on his word for the sake of living on.

## **Conclusion**

From the Buddha’s explanation of the causes of earthquakes, we can see that his renunciation of the life principle at Vaishali must have been a great event to be able to cause a mighty earthquake! It certainly deserves to be included as one of the miraculous events in the Buddha’s life.

## 4.2 Historical Background

After the Mahaparinibbana, the Licchavis obtained a share of the Buddha's relics from Kushinagar and erected a grand stupa over the holy relics in Vaishali. Eventually, the Vajjian confederacy was defeated by Ajatasattu, whose son Udayibhadda slew his father and moved the capital from Rajgir to Pataliputta, across the Ganges river from Vaishali. According to the Mahavamsa (Great Chronicle of Ceylon), the dynasty of Udayibhadda was succeeded by three generations of parricidal kings, namely: Anuruddha, Munda and Nagadasa who each slew his own father to take over the throne. By then, the people could not tolerate this dynasty of parricides. In the end, the minister Sisunaga, son of a Licchavi prince deposed Nagadasa. Sisunnaga was succeeded by his son, Kalasoka, and by then a hundred years had passed since the Mahaparinibbana.

At that time in Vaishali, many shameless bhikkhus of the Vajji clan were indulging in **Ten Practices** that did not conform with the Vinya or monastic rules. **Venerable Yasa** of Kosambi, while in Vaishali noticed the deviations and strongly protested against them, resulting in his expulsion by the Vajji monks. Ven. Yasa, together with other monks appealed to **Ven. Revata** of Soreyya, the chief of the Sangha to settle the dispute. Thereupon, the **Second Council** was convened at **Valukarama** monastery in Vaishali during the reign of King **Kalasoka** and attended by 700 arahants. **Venerable Sabbakami**, the most senior arahant, questioned by Ven. Revata, adjudged the Ten Practices as unlawful according to the Vinaya.

Forty years after the Second Council, another controversy arose that would split the Sangha. According to the tradition of the Sammitiya School recorded by Bhavya, a monk named **Bhadra** (or Mahadeva) proposed **Five Heresies** questioning the nature of the arahant. A great assembly of ten thousand, consisting of monks and laity called 'Mahasangiti' was convened in Pataliputta

with the support of the king and the majority voted in favour of these heretical views. This resulted in a schism in the Sangha and the secession of the **Mahasanghika**, from which the sect derived its name and decided matters according to their own light. From then on, further schisms led to the formation of different sub-sects, and in the course of time, eleven sub-sects arose out of the Theravada while seven issued from the Mahasanghika, leading to the well-known **Eighteen Schools of Buddhism**.

Asoka, the Mauryan emperor who had his capital in Pataliputta near Vaishali raised a stupa in which he enshrined some of the Buddha's relics and erected beside it an Asokan column with a lion capital when he visited Vaishali during his pilgrimage to the holy places in 249 BC.

**Faxian**, who visited Vaishali in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD described the vihara (Kutagarasala) of the great forest (Mahavana), which had a two-storied tower but made no mention of a monkey tank.

**Xuanzang** who came two hundred years later saw the stupa built by the Licchavi princes over their portion of the Buddha's relics from Kusinara located at Basarh. At Kolhua, he saw a stupa built by Asoka and the Asokan pillar about 50 or 60 feet high with a lion capital on top. He mentioned a tank dug by a band of monkeys (Markatahrada) for the Buddha's use and related the story of the offering of honey by the monkeys to the Buddha.

After Xuanzang's visit, the history of Vaishali remained blank for over twelve centuries. It lay in ruins, unknown and unheard of until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when **Cunningham** identified the ruins at and around **Basarh** in Vaishali district of Bihar with ancient Vaishali. Today, most of the principal ruins are located in the village of **Kolhua**, 3.2 km northeast of Basarh.

## 4.4 Objects of Interest

### Buddhist Monuments at Basarh

#### (i) Raj Vishal ka Garh, the site of ancient Vaishali

Vaishali derives its name from Raja Vishal of the Mahabharata era. The village of **Basarh** has been identified as the site of the ancient city of Vaishali. The site of the Raj Vishal ka Garh or Fort of Raja Vishal is believed to represent the citadel of Vaishali where the 7707 rajas or representatives of the Vajjian confederacy used to meet and discuss the matters of the day. The ruins consist of a large brick-covered mound 2.5 m above the surrounding level and 1500 m in circumference with a 42.7 m moat surrounding it. A kilometer northwest, near to the Relic Stupa of the Licchavis is a large pond believed to be the Coronation tank where the Licchavis used to anoint their elected representatives or rajas with its water.



**Plate 67:** This 2001 photo shows the extensive, neglected ruins of the ancient city of Vaishali, located at the present day village of Basarh in Vaishali.



**Plate 68:** Abhishek Puskarni or Coronation tank at Basarh where the Licchavis used to anoint their rajas or elected representatives with its water. The white stupa in the background is the Shanti stupa built by Fuji Guruji of Japan.

## **(ii) The Relic Stupa of the Licchavis**

Next to the Coronation tank is the archaeological park, where an open shelter with a dome-shaped roof stands. Under it are the remains of a stupa, which was originally a mud structure 25 feet in diameter with thin layers of cloddy clay. It appeared to have undergone enlargement and repairs four times, in which burnt bricks were used. The third enlargement increased its diameter to 40 feet and the fourth being in the form of a buttress supporting the third. The original mud stupa was a very old one, believed to be pre-Mauryan. From its primitive features and from the fact that a 2'6" trench had been driven into its core in olden times, it is believed that this stupa is none other than the one erected by the Licchavis over their share of the relics of the Buddha. The trench was probably excavated by Asoka to reach the relics, some of which were left in their original position by Asoka.



In the centre of the original mud stupa, lying in the lowest layer of soil anciently disturbed by the trench, archaeologists in 1958 found a relic **casket of soapstone** (steatite) cracked from the pressure above. It contained one-fourth full of ashy earth, a piece of gold leaf, two glass beads, a small conch and a copper punch-marked coin. Based on the archaeological, literary and traditional evidence available, the archaeologists are of the opinion that this mud stupa is the one built by the Licchavis and the casket it contained most probably enshrined a portion of the ashes of the Buddha mixed with a lot of earth collected at his cremation. That it should be partly full reminds us of the statement made by Xuanzang that: “*Asoka, opening the stupa took away **nine-tenths** of the relics leaving only one-tenth behind. Afterwards there was a king of the country who wished to open the stupa again but at the moment when he began to do so, the earth trembled, and he dared not proceed to open it.*” (Reference: The Corporeal Relics of the Buddha. Dr. A. S. Altekar, 1956. Patna Museum, Patna)



**Plate 69:** The original relic stupa of the Licchavis at Basarh was made of mud. At the center of this stupa is an open trench, believed to have been made by King Asoka when he came to collect part of the relics for re-distribution.

## **Buddhist Monuments at Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) Park in Kolhua**

### **(iii) The Asokan Pillar**

At Kolhua, 3.2 km northeast of Basarh, stands the impressive Asokan Pillar erected by Asoka 2250 years ago. It is a complete monolithic pillar of highly polished sandstone surmounted by a lion capital. The height is 6.7 m above the ground with a considerable portion sunk underground over the years. Though devoid of inscription, it appears to be a part of the line of pillars in the northern Bihar districts; Lauriya Areraj, Lauriya Nandangarh, Rampurva – that Asoka erected along his pilgrimage route from Pataliputta to Lumbini during 249-250 BC. Around the Asokan Pillar at Kolhua are the ruins of many smaller brick stupas.

### **(iv) The Asoka Stupa and the ‘Monkey Pond’**

Beside the Asokan pillar is the Asoka Stupa seen by Xuanzang. The dome-shaped mound is 4.6 m high, diameter of 20 m. During excavation by Cunningham, a stone casket containing some relics of the Buddha was found enshrined beneath it. This site is the place to offer puja, followed by chanting of the Ratana Sutta or by walking/sitting meditation at the stupa. Most Indian tourist guides mistake this stupa for the Ananda stupa located at Hajipur. (Today the Ananda stupa can still be seen at Hajipur. See “Buddhist Pilgrimage, pp.175-176” by Chan Khoon San.)

Beside the Asoka Stupa is a large tank that Xuanzang identified as the tank dug by a band of monkeys (markata-hrada). According to Northern (Mahayana) books, the Kutagarasala was on the banks of the **lake Markata** (Markatahradatire). (Ref. “Kutagarasala” in Dictionary of Pali Proper Names by G P Malalasekera). Xuanzang probably mistook this for the pond in front of the Kutagarasala and named it ‘monkey pond.’

The Chinese monk **Faxian** who visited Vaishali in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD recorded in the 'Fo-Kwo-Ki' as follows: "To the north of the city of Vaishali (Basarh), there is the vihara of the great forest, which has a two-storied tower (Kutagarasala). This chapel was once occupied by Buddha. Here also is the tower built over half the body of Ananda."

**Xuanzang** who visited Vaishali two centuries later mentioned that the Ananda stupa was located 30 li southeast of a Mahayana monastery called Svetapura. "On either (north and south) side of the Ganges River, there is a stupa; this is the spot where Ven. Ananda divided his body between the two kingdoms." It appears that Faxian was mistaken about the location of the Ananda stupa.

### **(v) The Site of Kutagara Sala (Hall with Pointed Roof)**

The great Pali commentator Venerable Buddhaghosa explained the origin of the name Kutagarasala as follows: "In the forest was established a Sangharama or monastery. A pasada or storied building was built on pillars, a pinnacle was put above it and it was made into a Kutagarasala resembling a mansion of devas. From it, all Sangharamas are known as Kutagarasala." (Ref. "The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa, p.104" by B. C. Law)

From the records of the Chinese monks, we may surmise that the Kutagarasala was still standing at the time of Faxian but was gone by the time of Xuanzang. It was probably uninhabited and fell into decay and disappeared over time.

The Buddha spent his 5<sup>th</sup> vassa at the Kutgarasala in Vaishali. He also stayed there on several occasions, and the suttas record various eminent persons who visited him there and of his conversations with them. Among such visitors are mentioned several Licchavi chiefs, such as Mahali and general Siha who came accompanied by 500 chariots.

Once the young Jaina Saccaka came to the Kutagarasala to challenge the Buddha, boasting that the latter would “shake, shiver and tremble, and sweat under the armpits if he were to engage in debate with me.” When confronted by the Buddha after much argumentation in the presence of many Licchavis, he was left speechless and had to agree with the Buddha on every point of debate. The two encounters are described in the Cula- and the Maha-Saccaka Suttas (MN.35 and MN.36).

Sometimes the Buddha would walk from the Kutagarasala to quiet places nearby, e.g., the Saranda shrine and Capala shrine. It was at the Capala shrine that the Buddha renounced the will to live on, three month before the Mahaparinibbana.



**Plate 70:** View of the main monuments at Kolhua from the south showing the famous Asokan Pillar crowned by the Lion Capital. Beside it is the Asoka Stupa erected by King Asoka when he visited Vaishali during his Pilgrimage in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Note that the Lion Capital is pointing north, the direction that King Asoka took on his way to Lumbini as part of his Pilgrimage. In the foreground is a large tank that Xuanzang identified as the monkey tank.



**Plate 71:** Another view of the Asoka Stupa on the north side shows a large number of votive stupas, pointing to the great importance of the place



**Plate 72:** . In fact, recent excavations revealed more votive stupas on the other side of the Asoka Stupa as shown in this photo taken in 2011.



**Plate 73:** On the western side of the tank is a cement signboard identifying the site of the Kutagarasala, where the Buddha used to stay when he was in Vaishali



**Plate 74:** Ruins of a monastery from post-Gupta period built on the site of the original Kutagarasala. The post Gupta period is around the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the time when Xuanzang visited this place. When Faxian came during the early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, he described the Kutagarasala as a two storied tower.





**Plate 75:** Nearby is another cement signboard identifying the site of a nunnery.



**Plate 76:** Ruins of a 12-room nunnery constructed during the Gupta period for the residence of nuns. The Gupta period was from 320 to 550 AD and is known as the Golden Age of India in science, mathematics, astronomy, religion and philosophy.