

## Pilgrimage to India: The Four Holy Sites of Buddhism

By Rev. Master Seikai

The opportunity to go to India on a pilgrimage to the holy sites was made by the Vietnamese Sangha, a branch of which is in Ventura, the nearest city to Pine Mountain Temple. The trip was led by Ven. Thich Thong Hai, whose home temple is in Hawaii. It seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to Rev. Phoebe and myself, and never having been to Asia in my life, I jumped at the chance to do so. Several people made donations to the temple's travel fund, including the OBC, to defray the cost of the trip, and the full amount was received; by doing so, the donors share in the merit of the pilgrimage.



The Four Holy Sites, which the Buddha himself recommended as destination points for Buddhist devotees after his death, are Lumbini, his birthplace (which is in present day Nepal); Bodh Gaya, where he was enlightened (in the state of Bihar, India); the Deer Park in Sarnath, outside of Varanasi, where he gave his first sermon, turning the Wheel of the Dharma; and Kushinagar, the location where he died at the age of 80, which is also in India. Varanasi and Kushinagar are in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

On the pilgrimage we also visited four other sites associated with the Buddha: the Jetavana monastery in Sravasti; Kapilavastu, the kingdom of the Shakya clan into which the Buddha was born; Vaisali, site of the first Buddhist Council and the founding of the bhikkshuni Sangha; and Vulture Peak in Rajgir, where the Buddha gave many sermons. In this article I will deal with the four holy sites, and leave the other four for another article.

We initially landed in Delhi, one of the largest cities in the world including a big modern airport, and then flew to the ancient city of Varanasi, also known as Benares, on the Ganges River. Outside of Varanasi is the town of Sarnath, where the **Deer Park** is located; this was the first of the holy sites that we visited. A very ancient stupa marks the spot where the Buddha set the Wheel of the Dharma in motion. It is surrounded by scaffolding, towards what purpose I never heard. We circumambulated the stupa and held a chanting ceremony. There was to me a very serene atmosphere at the Deer Park, surrounded as it is by an urban area, which in India is always dense with people, buildings crowded together, stray animals, and street traffic which at first seemed impossibly chaotic to me, a Westerner used to the orderly flow of traffic on an American road or highway. All of the holy sites were essentially park-like campuses, home to huge flocks of birds, giving the impression of a religious refuge and wildlife refuge rolled into one.

The following morning we made our way through the ancient heart of the city, partially on foot, and arriving at the river's edge, took a boat ride out on the Ganges. We released some fish into the river, some small lotus boats with lit candles, held a chanting service, and motored past the famous charnel grounds. While on the river the sun rose orange-red, the result of the smoke that is perpetually in the atmosphere in India.

From Varanasi we traveled by bus north first to Sravasti and the next day into Nepal to Lumbini. The area has seen quite a bit of building in the past few decades, and a temple district has come into being around Lumbini. Most of the Asian nations which are Buddhist or have significant Buddhist populations have built a temple there. The United Nations has designated the actual birth site of the Buddha as a UN Heritage Site, so it gets special attention as a result. In the 1980s, a temple-like structure was built over the actual excavation site of the original garden where Queen Mahamaya gave birth to Siddhartha. There is still archaeological work being done there; photography was not allowed inside the building. One can view an excavated spot, originally marked by one of King Ashoka's pillars, where the Buddha is said to have been born, and there are what appear to be footprints—perhaps the first steps taken by the infant Siddhartha as in the legend of his birth.

Outside the birth site temple there is a pool of recent construction, around which we sat in meditation, a large Bodhi Tree—undoubtedly a descendant of the original tree—and a modern pillar representing the one erected by King Ashoka a

few hundred years after the life of the Buddha, in front of which we chanted scriptures. These ancient pillars provided the clues necessary to pinpoint the locations of the Buddha's birth and other sites of importance. They were unearthed by the British during their rule of the Indian subcontinent, beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; so apart from several ancient stupas, the ruins of which are still extant, most of what exists at the holy sites is of recent construction. Buddhism had long since been essentially wiped out of India by the time the British arrived two hundred years ago.

At **Lumbini**, archaeological work has unearthed the ruins of some very old temples which are at the site of the Buddha's birth. The grounds are very well kept, in contrast to the litter that one encounters as a rule in India, and to a lesser degree in Nepal. There were quite a few monks present here, mainly of the Theravada and Tibetan traditions, as well as beggars, many of them children, who target foreigners for handouts of money. Being tall, a Westerner and a monk, I attracted attention wherever we went, and so I was often surrounded by people begging or trying to sell things. We made a day trip to Kapilavastu, which is an hour or two distant from Lumbini, and then traveled back into India to Kushinagar, the site of the Buddha's death.

There are extensive ruins in **Kushinagar**, both temples and stupas. A modern Parinirvana temple and stupa have been built, which are now the main focus of activity there. As it was early November, not too long after the end of the rainy season in India, vassa—the monastic rains retreat—had ended, and lay Buddhists were making offerings of cloth to the monastic Sangha. So we performed a katina ceremony as well, offering a bolt of gold fabric to the Buddha statue in the Parinirvana temple. The Buddha is of course lying down in the Parinirvana position, making it possible to drape long pieces of fabric over it. Chanting was in Vietnamese, but at all of the places we visited, I was asked to chant in English as part of the ceremonial. So I typically chanted *The Scripture of Great Wisdom* and, in this case, the *Adoration of the Buddha's Relics*; there were Theravada monks chanting at the same time as me, so I harmonized my voice with their chanting note—I thought it was very beautiful. Also on the grounds are fairly extensive ruins of old Buddhist temples and stupas.

A short distance from the Parinirvana temple is the site where the Buddha was cremated and his ashes gathered up and distributed. There is an ancient stupa there where we did more chanting. Right across the road was a Tibetan temple, which has an actual relic of Shakyamuni Buddha—a small piece of bone which we were allowed to view. We also visited a Burmese temple with its large stupa which is adjacent to the Parinirvana temple campus, and a Vietnamese temple close by. All of these temples had what I would consider fairly extraordinary statuary, being from America where there is relatively little Buddhist art. The atmosphere of devotion is always very profound in these places.

From Kushinagar, we continued on into the Indian state of Bihar to Bodh Gaya. It was a long and taxing bus ride, and I was sick with a cold at that point, which made it a challenge. Typically on our bus rides, which would require getting up at 4:30 and setting off from the hotel at 6:30, we would hold morning service, again in Vietnamese followed by me chanting in English. That day we were caught in a horrific traffic snarl, and later that night, at about 11pm, I asked the bus driver to stop as I had to empty my overstretched bladder. We pulled off the road, I went to relieve myself, and just at that moment a camel train of about a dozen camels went past. It was a surreal moment—at night on the edge of a large Indian city. I think it was perhaps 2am when we arrived in **Bodh Gaya**.

After managing a few hours of sleep, we walked from our hotel into the Mahabodhi Stupa complex, which has the Bodhi Tree on one side of it. That it was so close to our hotel was a real boon, because it meant that I could walk there several times on my own to meditate at the Bodhi Tree. We held a chanting service and circumambulated the stupa, which has a shrine in the interior of it with a largish Buddha statue seated there. At one point I joined a Vietnamese monk who was doing a memorial ceremony for the ancestors of a member of our group, so we were in the shrine for at least an hour. During that time, several groups of Sri Lankan lay Buddhists arrived to offer cloth as part of their katina ceremonial. There was one monk, working very hard, who would take all the cloth offerings, put them in front of the Buddha, and soon thereafter remove them as another group would come in and the whole process would be repeated. Before we left India, I was given a piece of quite nice gold fabric which had been part of an offering to the Buddha in the Mahabodhi Stupa shrine.

I spent quite a bit of time on the north side of the stupa, which is “**The Cloister Walk**”, i.e. the place where Shakyamuni Buddha did walking meditation for a week following his enlightenment. There is a very long altar there where people make offerings of flowers, and next to it a series of very old lotus flowers carved in stone, which were said to represent the footsteps of the Buddha as he did walking meditation. There was a narrow aisle between the two where I was able to do walking meditation and not get in anyone’s way; there are always a lot of people at the Mahabodhi Stupa and the Bodhi Tree, and I noticed some people circumambulating the stupa continuously for periods of time.

To the south of the stupa there is a manmade pond containing a statue of the serpent Mukhalinda, who is said to have shielded the Buddha from the sun. On the west side is the Bodhi Tree, where groups of people would hold various activities, usually chanting or Dharma talks. Set further back are dozens of stupas, any one of which would be fairly impressive on their own, and some largish platforms where monks would hold services every morning. On the north side, where there is another Bodhi Tree and many stupas, there was what appeared to be an encampment of Tibetan monks. Around this whole complex is a raised walkway, making it possible to circumambulate everything in the

complex of perhaps five acres. There are also now security checks which have been put in place following a bombing incident which took place in the summer (2013); one must now pass through metal detectors, etc., just as in an airport.

There is a very high level of energy around the **Mahabodhi Stupa and the Bodhi Tree**, which is almost palpable. Being the most important location and shrine in the entire Buddhist world, it is the focus of constant devotion and spiritual practices. There were always quite a few monks present whenever I was able to spend time there; most were Theravadan, quite a few Tibetan monks, and relatively few recognizably Mahayana monks such as the Vietnamese monks and me. I didn't see more than a handful of European or American monks like myself, and as usual I attracted some attention being white and tall; people often wanted their picture taken next to me.

Being able to sit under the Bodhi Tree and do walking meditation on the ground where the Buddha did so many centuries ago was an experience I will treasure the rest of my life. There are definitely challenges attendant to traveling in India. Making progress along roads is pretty slow, less than half the rate one can travel in America. On the other hand, it is a fascinating country, very colorful, with a completely different set of values than what we take for granted in Western society. In some ways, I felt at home in India generally, but especially at the holy sites of Buddhism. They are very powerful places to visit, very inspiring, and definitely worth the rigors of the journey. To physically be at these places where important events in the life of the Buddha took place has a powerful and profound impact, which, having been back just over a month at this point, I am still pondering.